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A County Divided Against Itself – How Politics Polarized Sauk County

“We are slow to realize that democracy is a life, and involves continual struggle.”

- Robert M. La Follette, governor of Wisconsin 1901-1906.

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Abstract

Through ethnographic fieldwork consisting of qualitative semi-structured interviews and the use of grounded theory this thesis examines which factors are causing the polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County, Wisconsin. The findings from this microlevel investigation are then used to explain the wider implications of polarization in the American society anno 2020. By analyzing the interviews and comparing the findings to existing research on the topic of political polarization, this thesis finds that not only Sauk County, but the whole of the United States, have become more polarized over moral and cultural issues such as abortion, gun control, universal health care, and climate change. Even homosexuality and LGBTQ rights are continuing to cause polarization among Democrats and Republicans despite both groups being increasingly more accepting. This conclusion is reached as the fieldwork conducted in Sauk County is consistent with the existing research and surveys on polarization in the United States. Consequently, this thesis concludes that the current polarization in Sauk County, as well as in the United States, emanates from the culture wars in the seventies. Thus, polarization should be viewed as a continuation that has persisted for decades and not as a new phenomenon, but rather as a conflict between two opposing views of America that has been successfully reignited by President Trump. Additionally, by applying grounded theory, this thesis shows how backlashes to social progress are an integral part of American history and so this thesis constructs the claim that Joe Biden, who is likely to be the Democratic candidate for the presidency, will win the election in November, and that the election result is likely to be followed by protests and demands for a recount. Ultimately, and returning to the research question, this thesis argues that the current polarization in Sauk County, as well as in the United States, between Democrats and Republicans should be seen as the culmination of the culture wars before a transitional period towards a new consensus on moral and cultural issues in the United States.

The scope of this thesis is Sauk County - a swing county that shifts between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party at presidential elections. In the last 11 presidential elections, the Democratic Party has won six times in Sauk County while the Republican Party has won five times. Furthermore, Sauk County is named as one of the ten most important counties in the 2020 election due to the close presidential election in 2016, when Donald Trump won by just 109 votes against the Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton. This was the fourth election in a row where the winner in Sauk County would end up as the next president. And in eight of the previous 11 presidential elections, Sauk County has chosen the eventual winner of the election. Thus, Sauk County is a bellwether for which way American politics are moving. This makes it particularly important to examine what factors are at play in Sauk County as it serves as an American microcosmos.

To answer what factors are causing the polarization in Sauk County, this thesis is utilizing ethnographic fieldwork consisting of ten interviews that were conducted from February 22nd and until March 7th 2020 among Democrats and Republicans living in the county. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using questionnaires with a fixed wording in order to reduce the interview bias as much as possible, though even a fixed wording cannot completely leave out any risk of bias. The questionnaires contained questions regarding specific issues that has traditionally been seen as being very polarizing – for example the interviewees were asked about their opinion on abortion and gun control. The answers were then compared to recent surveys from Pew Research Center on these issues. The interviewees were also asked more open questions regarding what issues they felt concerned them as well as what values they deemed to be of particular importance. The key polarizing factors were identified by analyzing the interviews, and subsequently the thesis was subdivided into categories that is being used to elaborate on these polarizing factors. This thesis examines abortion, homosexuality, gun control, climate change, universal health care, President Trump and political opponents, media habits, and rural-urban voting behavior. Subsequently, these

factors help explain why and how political polarization has been in an upward trend in recent decades, culminating with the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016.

Key words: polarization, urban, rural, Trump, culture war, Wisconsin, Democratic, Republican, abortion, gun control.

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Introduction

Wisconsin, the Nation's dairyland, has always been swinging. Swinging in elections between Democrats and Republicans. It has been this way since Wisconsin gained statehood in 1848 and became the 30th state of the United States. In the 43 presidential elections held from 1848 to 2016, the voters of Wisconsin have voted for a Republican candidate 25 times and a Democratic candidate 17 times. Once, in 1924, they favored their own former house representative, governor and then U.S. senator Robert M. La Follette, *Fighting Bob*, when he ran as a Progressive. The Republican Party has dominated the state at presidential elections for the first 80 years, followed by more than 50 years of swinging back and forth. The Democratic Party dominated from 1988 and until Donald Trump's Republican win in 2016. (Wisconsin Blue Book, p. 506.) Moreover, statistics point to an inherent division between Wisconsinites, between the rural and the urban counties, between the countrymen and the urbanites. Wisconsin raised both Joe McCarthy and Robert M. La Follette – both got elected as senators to represent Wisconsin in Washington D.C., and though both Republican, they represented very different beliefs and ideas. McCarthy, who served as senator from 1947 to 1957, is today best remembered for lending his name to *McCarthyism*, the anti-communist red scare that followed in the years after the Second World War. On the other hand, La Follette, though he only carried Wisconsin when he ran for The White House, fathered Progressivism. (Cramer, p. 54.) In her book *The Politics of Resentment – Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Katherine J. Cramer, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, argues that Wisconsin evolved into a partisan battleground for Republicans and Democrats in 2000. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama swept the state when they ran for the presidency. In fact, no other state has had as many counties that voted for Bush in the 2004 presidential election and for Obama in 2012. (Cramer, p. 10.) In the Wisconsin State Legislature in Madison the majority by tradition has also shifted between the two parties for

decades. In that sense the state of Wisconsin seems to be constantly moving, and therefore the state motto *forward* seems to be rather fitting as it implies movement. But where Wisconsin is moving to, is the question asked by many political strategists in recent years, as Wisconsin has moved to the center of American politics and is now deemed as one of the most important swing states in the presidential elections. In order to better understand these constant shifts between a Republican and a Democratic majority, this thesis will zoom in on Sauk County as it is located right between the state capitol of Madison to the east and the sparsely populated, rural dairy country to the west.

Research Question

In September 2019, the American newspaper and online media *The Hill* named Sauk County, a Wisconsin county with approximately 64,000 inhabitants, as one of the ten most important counties in the 2020 presidential election. Here, at the presidential election in 2016, the current president, Donald J. Trump, had won against the Democratic candidate Hilary Clinton by just 109 votes out of a total of 31,357 votes cast. (The Hill, 2019.) It was the fourth time in a row at a presidential election that the voters in Sauk County had chosen the candidate that would end up becoming the next president of the United States – and the eighth time out the last 11 elections. Since the presidential election in 1976, the voters in Sauk County have favored a Democrat six times and a Republican five times. This underlines that Sauk County is very much a swing county in a swing state. As a bellwether Sauk County draws attention in election years as the county has proven to be somewhat of an indicator of the tide in American politics. From the more urban area around the main city of Baraboo with its 12,000 inhabitants in the east to the rural dairyland in the west, Sauk County is an interesting microcosmos of modern American society. Because, whoever wins in Sauk County, wins the White House.

Thus, this thesis will be guided by the following questions: which factors help explain the current polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County, Wisconsin? And how does this microlevel investigation contribute to a greater understanding of American society in 2020?

Concept Clarification

The key concepts of this thesis are polarization, urban, and rural. The terms will be used frequently throughout and therefore it is important to define them so that all readers of this thesis will have a shared realm of understanding.

Polarization

"We are told that red-state residents are more likely to be Evangelicals, gun owners, country music devotees, beer drinkers, and NASCAR fans, whereas blue-state residents are more likely to be agnostics or atheists, Volvo drivers, supporters of the fine arts, chardonnay sippers, and people who sail," writes political scientists Morris P. Fiorina and Samuel J. Abrams in the 2008 *Annual Review of Political Science*. (Fiorina, p. 567.) This is a typical representation of polarization in the media and popular culture. The Cambridge Dictionary defines polarization as "the act of dividing something, especially something that contains different people or opinions, into two completely opposing groups." In *Partisans without Constraint: Political Polarization and Trends in American Public Opinion*, Delia Baldassarri from Princeton University and Andrew Gelman from Columbia University define public opinion polarization as "a process of alignment along multiple lines of potential disagreement and measured as growing constraint in individuals' preferences." (Baldassarri, p. 408.) Baldassari and Gelman argue that while American public opinion has remained stable or become even more moderate on many political issues over the last 40 years, the

population has taken more extreme positions on specific issues such as abortion, sexual morality, and the war in Iraq. (Baldassarri, p. 410.) According to Fiorina and Abrams, polarization will increase when a population moves from one consensual state to its opposite. As an example they mention that a generation ago roughly 75 percent of the American population agreed that homosexuality was "always wrong". That is considered a consensual state of public opinion. Around 1990, the public opinion on homosexuality began to change and today public opinion on homosexuality, according to Fiorina and Abrams, appears more polarized because the public opinion has moved away from consensus. But this apparent rise in polarization can also be viewed as a sign of transition in the American public opinion, the researchers argue. "But if current trends continue, in 20 years public opinion circa 2007 will appear as roughly the midpoint of a transitional period when American society moved from a position of consensual rejection of homosexuality to a position of consensual acceptance of homosexuality. Therefore, evidence of increasing polarization at one point in time may indicate something different when viewed in a longer context." (Fiorina, p. 567.) According to Fiorina and Abrams, polarization happens when two groups move away from the center, the center being consensus, toward the extremes. (Fiorina, p. 567.) In his book *Why Cities Lose,* political scientist Jonathan A. Rodden argues that the Republican party is advocating for low taxes, less regulation, gun rights and traditional social values, while the Democratic party has taken progressive stands on abortion, gender and immigration. "Voter's preferences on these issues are highly correlated with population density" writes Rodden. (Rodden, p.8.) According to Rodden "the Democrats, quite simply, have evolved into a diverse collection of urban interest groups, and the Republicans into an assemblage of exurban and rural interests. (…) It might be more accurate to refer to the main dimension of political conflict in the United States as "urban" versus "rural"." (Rodden, p. 9.) For this thesis polarization will be used to describe the divide between the urban population around Baraboo, who are more Democratic leaning, and the rural

population in the western part of the county, who are more Republican leaning. Therefore, building on Fiorina and Abrams, this thesis defines polarization as the result of a population that has moved from one consensual state on specific issues such as abortion and sexual morality to its opposite. This movement from consensus to opposition is the definition of polarization used in this thesis.

Urban

The United States Census Bureau defines urban as "areas of densely developed territory, specifically all territory, population and housing units in urbanized areas and urban clusters. 'Urban' classification cuts across other hierarchies except for census block and can be in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas." (Census Glossary.) According to the Census Bureau an urbanized area contains a minimum residential population of at least 50,000 people. With an estimated population of 12,142 in 2018 Baraboo, the largest city in Sauk County, cannot be defined as that. Following the Census definitions, it is more suitable to define Baraboo and the larger towns of Sauk County as urban clusters. An urban cluster is a densely developed territory that contains a minimum residential population of 2,500 people, but fewer than 50,000. With regards to Sauk County this definition is applicable to Baraboo, Lake Delton, Prairie du Sac, Reedsburg, and Sauk City. (Wisconsin Blue Book, p. 540.) In 2010, there were 486 urbanized areas and 3,087 urban clusters in the United States. Of those, 11 urbanized areas contained 71.2 percent of the total population, while 9.5 percent lived within urban clusters. (Ratcliffe, et al. 2016.)

Rural

The United States Census Bureau defines rural as "territory, population and housing units not classified as urban. 'Rural' classification cuts across other hierarchies and can be in metropolitan or non-metropolitan areas." (Census Glossary.) This definition means that any place with a population

less than 2,500 is deemed rural. The definition is therefore applicable for all towns and villages in Sauk County except for Baraboo, Reedsburg, Sauk City, Prairie du Sac, and Lake Delton. At the 2010 Census 5.7 million people lived in Wisconsin, and 48 percent of that population lived outside the 14 counties that make up the greater Milwaukee and Madison metropolitan areas. (Cramer, p. 13.) In 2010, the rural areas of the United States contained 19.3 percent of the population. Urban areas and urban clusters, which contained the majority of the population, only occupied about 3.0 percent of the land area in the United States. (Ratcliffe, et al. 2016.)

Literature Review

According to renowned sociologist Anthony Giddens, all research starts from a research problem in an attempt to fill a gap in our understanding. This means that one research project leads to new questions that can be examined in a new research project. As Giddens writes “a sociologist may discover puzzles by reading the work of other researchers in books and professional journals or by being aware of specific trends in society.” (Giddens, p. 79.) The puzzle for this thesis was an article in *The Hill* that named Sauk County as one of the ten most important counties in the 2020 presidential election. Why was this particular county - out of the 3,141 counties in the U.S. - so important, and which factors could help to explain the polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County? (USGS.) Hence, I began reviewing the existing research on this topic and getting myself familiar with the already existing knowledge. Therefore, the findings presented in this thesis should be seen as a continuation of the already existing research on the topic of polarization, but with a distinct focus on Sauk County. In the following, I will review the literature and research that has created the academic foundation for this thesis.

The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior (2020)

The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior is a scholarly article written by James G. Gimpel and Nathan Lovin from the Department of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland, together with Bryant Moy and Andrew Reeves from the Department of Political Science at the Washington University in St. Louis. The paper was published in the journal *Political Behavior* on March 5th 2020. By examining Gallup Survey data from 2003 to 2018, the researchers argue that urban and rural dwellers oppose each other because they live far away from each other and have very limited contact. The paper also concludes that Democrats live in urban areas, while Republicans tend to live in more urban areas. The two groups tend to favor different political parties because population size structures opinion quite differently in small towns compared with large cities. This is important in relation to Sauk County, where the eastern part of the county tends to be more urbanized and Democratic leaning, while the western part of the county is more rural and conservative. The analysis is based on archived Gallup polls conducted almost monthly from 2003 through 2018, including both election and non-election years. It includes nearly 125,000 observations, including almost 25,000 small town and rural respondents. (Gimpel, et al, p. 3.) A point of critique of the research is that it is only focusing on presidential elections and thus future research could examine whether or not the same partisan divide is present at state- and local elections. Such a research project could also help explain the case of Sauk County.

The Politics of Resentment – Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker (2016)

This book, written by Katherine J. Cramer, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2016. By employing an ethnographic method where she observed groups and conducted several structured interviews in 27

unnamed rural communities in Wisconsin over a five year period spanning from 2007 to 2012, Cramer developed the theory of rural consciousness. Cramer's research shows that rural Wisconsinite voters support small government, less regulation and tend to vote for Tea Party candidates such as Scott Walker, the former Republican governor of Wisconsin. Cramer describes rural consciousness as a "perspective that is at its core an identity rooted in place and class. But it is infused with a sense of distributive injustice – a sense that rural folks don't get their fair share." (Cramer, p. 12.) According to Cramer, three perspectives occurred during her interviews in rural communities in Wisconsin: a belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers and policy makers. A perception that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and a sense that rural folks have distinct values and lifestyles that are disrespected by people living in the cities. This concept is important in order to understand the polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County since the Republican Party are dependent on rural voters. (Cramer, p. 13.) "Over the past 15 years the percentage of rural Americans represented by Republicans in the House has grown sharply, while urban Americans have shifted slightly to House Democrats. (…) As Democrats have come to dominate U.S. cities, it is Republican strength in rural areas that allows the party to hold control of the House and remain competitive in presidential elections," Cramer writes, quoting an article from the Wall Street Journal. (Cramer, p. 13.)

The work carried out by Cramer is important both methodologically and politically, and for this thesis it offers invaluable insights on the rural population of Wisconsin and the rural-urban polarization within the state. The book itself is written in a style that resembles a novel. A good example is the intentional use of first-person narration. Cramer, herself a Wisconsinite, uses "I" throughout the book, and this creates a strong link between herself and the communities she is researching because she herself is part of that story. "I had a lot of reasons for studying Wisconsin. But the three most important ones where these: I grew up here, I love this state, and I care deeply

about it." (Cramer, p. 11.) By analyzing the descriptions of the groups observed by Cramer from 2007 to 2012, it becomes evident that there is a majority of older, white men and most of them are described as retirees. (Cramer, p. 230.) A consequence of the methodological approach of the observed groups is the focus on people who regularly meet in groups and therefore are likely to be more active and more involved socially and perhaps also more likely to join organizations such as political parties. The same has been the case for the research for this thesis, and so it is likely to assume that especially male retirees are more likely to join organizations and partake in conversations. However, this can create a bias in the research, and the researcher has to be aware of this.

Strangers in Their Own Land – Anger and Mourning on the American Right (2016)

This book is written by the American sociologist and professor emeritus at University of California, Berkeley, Arlie Russell Hochschild. The book has received a lot attention in the press since it was ascribed to have predicted the election of Donald J. Trump in November 2016. Hochschild acknowledges this herself. "Looking back at my previous research, I see that the scene had been set for Trump's rise, like kindling before a match is lit." (Hochschild, p. 221.) Talking about her book, Hochschild has said:

> Focusing on emotions, I try to scale an 'empathy wall' to learn how to see, think and feel as they do. What, I ask, do members of the Tea Party - or anyone else - want to feel about the nation and its leaders? I trace this desire to what I call their 'deep story' - a feels-as-if story of their difficult struggle for the American Dream. Hidden beneath the right-wing hostility to almost all government intervention, I argue, lies an anguishing loss of honor, alienation and engagement in a hidden social class war. (Berkeley Sociology.)

The aim of the research project was, by utilizing an ethnographic approach, to understand those people who would end up voting for Trump in 2016 and to understand the emotional appeal of the Tea Party movement. Hochschild writes that "this book is based on a kind of research sociologists describe as 'exploratory' and 'hypothesis generating.'" (Hochschild, p. 247.) In order to "get close", Hochschild used interviews, participant observation, profile selection, and statistical analysis:

> My first step was to conduct four focus groups, two of Tea Party supporters and two of Democrats, all composed of middle-class white women from Lake Charles, Louisiana. I then did follow-up interviews with nearly all of the conservative women and sometimes, in a method social scientists call 'snowball sampling,' with their husbands, parents, and neighbors. (Hochschild, p. 247.)

Hochschild also followed two rival congressional candidates on their campaign trail. In total, she interviewed 60 people and accumulated 4,690 pages of transcripts from interviews with 40 Tea Party supporters and 20 others. The interviewees consisted of roughly two equally large groups of women and men. All were white and between 40 and 85 years old. (Hochschild, p. 18.) From those interviews she identified six persons who were used for participant observation. "Visiting places of birth, churches, and burial plots, sharing meals, driving places together, attending events, and more." (Hochschild, p. 249.) The research was conducted over a period of five years from 2011 to 2016, during which Hochschild, who lives Berkeley, California, made 10 fieldtrips to Louisiana. This approach was also used by Cramer, who lived in Madison during her fieldwork and travelled to the rural communities in Wisconsin when observing and interviewing. During the five years Hochschild partly spent in Louisiana she met and befriended the local people living there. "I'm

from Berkeley, California, a sociologist, and I am trying to understand the deepening divide in our country. So I'm trying to get out of my political bubble and get to know people in yours." (Hochschild, p. 5.) This adds another layer to her understanding of the place she is exploring, though a pitfall in ethnography is the invariable risk that the surroundings or people will change behavior because they are aware that they are being monitored. Or the interviewees can change their behavior towards the researcher. Hochschild experienced this when she began her research. "When I told one man that I lived in Berkeley, he immediately replied: 'Oh, you got hippies'." (Hochschild, p. 22.) It would invariably have strengthened Hochschild's method, and likely also her standing among those she is examining, if she had lived in the community permanently for five years. Instead, she remains an outsider to the community as she only visited ten times during five years. Another point of criticism is the level of prejudice that Hochschild has towards the people who she is studying:

> To prepare for my journey, I re-read Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, a Tea Party bible lauded by the conservative radio pundit Rush Limbaugh and former Fox News television commentator Glenn Beck. (…) If Ayn Rand appealed to them, I imagined, they're probably pretty selfish, tough, cold people, and I prepared for the worst. But I was thankful to discover many warm, open people who were deeply charitable to those around them, including an older, white liberal stranger writing a book. (Hochschild, p. 22.)

For this thesis, Hochschild's book is primarily used as an inspiration in terms of method and how to conduct the interviews.

Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization (2015)

This article by Shanto Iyengar, Stanford University, and Sean J. Westwood, Princeton University, was published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 59, no. 3, in July 2015. The researchers argue that, when defined in terms of social identity and affect toward copartisans and opposing partisans, the polarization of the American electorate has dramatically increased in recent years. And as such, polarization is no longer only present in elections, but also in everyday life. "Scholars have typically treated the sense of partisan right identity as a major cue for political choices, most notably, voting behavior. We demonstrate that partisan cues now also influence decisions outside of politics and that partisanship is a political and social divide." (Iyengar, p. 690.) The research question was; how does partisan affect compare with affect based on other social divides, and to what extent are partisans willing to discriminate against opposing partisans in nonpolitical decisions. (Iyengar, p. 692.) To answer these questions, the researchers designed four different tests to measure the implicit partisan affect among the participants. One of the tests which was used is called the BIAT (The Brief Implicit Association Test) – a method developed by psychologists to measure the reaction time necessary to associate ingroups and outgroups – for example "Republican" and "Democrat." In a BIAT test, participants complete four rounds of 20 timed categorizations. The first two rounds count as training, while the last two rounds are used for scoring the measure of implicit attitudes. (Iyengar, p. 693.) In the rounds the participants are shown pictures that work as stimuli – for example images of the Democratic and Republican mascots. How and how quickly the participants respond are then turned into a score. The researchers find that the extent of the affective polarization is even across parties, though it finds that Republicans who identify as strongly partisan have a higher level of animus against outparty groups. (Iyengar, p. 705.) For this thesis, the paper by Iyengar and Westwood is used to describe the phenomenon of *affective polarization*. This is a term used to describe how partisans view members of their own

party in a positive way, while viewing the opposition in a negative way. The article is also helpful to underline how political polarization also affects the social life in terms of marriage and moving patterns in the United States – something that will be elaborated on in this thesis.

Something Happened – A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies (2006)

To understand the political polarization in the United States, it is important to understand the history of some of the most polarizing issues – both historically as well as in present day America. In *Something Happened*, Edward D. Berkowitz, a professor of history and public administration at George Washington University, accounts for the culture wars that took place during the seventies and the effects it had on the American society. Berkowitz argues that the end of the postwar economic boom, Watergate, Vietnam and the culture wars all contributed to an unravelling of the national consensus in America in the seventies. For this thesis Berkowitz' exploration of the "rights revolution" is of particular importance, as it is these currents that are still present in America, as well as Sauk County, today, on issues like abortion and gay rights. During the seventies, women, gays and lesbians and people with disabilities fought for greater recognition, and it is this development that Berkowitz describes in his book. According to Berkowitz, it was the rights revolution, and especially the issue of abortion that transformed the political landscape in America. The reason being that the fight for equal rights caused a backlash from conservative Americans, which led to the rise of politically conservative evangelical organizations that would pull, especially the Republican Party, further to the right of the political spectrum. The research for the book is based on secondary sources such as books about various aspects of the seventies, biographies, television programs, movies, presidential speeches from Nixon, Carter, and Regan, as well as texts from Supreme Court decisions. The author has also made use of material from the National

Archives, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, the presidential libraries of Ford and Carter, as well as material from Nixon's presidency. (Berkowitz, p. 235.)

Method

My window to explore the polarization between Democrats and Republicans is Sauk County, Wisconsin. Thus, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the county from February 22nd and until March 7th 2020. Anthony Giddens defines ethnography as a method where "the investigator hangs out or works or lives with a group, organization or community, and perhaps takes a direct part in their activities." (Giddens, p. 85.) Ethnography, a method within the study of anthropology, provides information on the behavior of certain people or communities, and how these people see their own behavior - in this case it can shed a light on the polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County. "Once we see how things look from inside a given group, we are likely to develop a better understanding not only of that group, but of social processes that transcend the situation under study." (Giddens, p. 85.) But the strength of fieldwork is also at the same time its weakness. Ethnography can only be used to study small groups or communities, and the outcome of the fieldwork is very dependent on the skills of the researcher in gaining the trust of the interviewees. (Giddens, p. 86.) During my stay I was able to attend an election meeting held by the Republican Party of Sauk County. I joined a fundraising dinner held by the Democratic Party of Sauk County. I was invited to the Wisconsin State Legislature in Madison where I was able to interview two of Sauk County's state representatives and meet the governor Tony Evers. I experienced a genuine Wisconsin tradition, when I was invited to Friday Night Fish Fry at a local family restaurant in Reedsburg with a couple I got to know. But most importantly, I was invited into the homes of eight Americans living in Sauk County to hear them tell what life looked like from their point of view.

Overall, there are four main methods for asking and answering sociological questions. Fieldwork, surveys, experiments, and documentary research. This thesis is utilizing fieldwork. A model for this type of research is described by Anthony Giddens in *Sociology*. The first step, according to Giddens, is to define a problem that can be the topic of the research. The next step is to review the existing literature on the topic. On that basis the researcher will formulate a hypothesis and select a research design to answer the question. Next step is to carry out the research and collect the data. The data will then be analyzed and interpreted, and the findings reported. Do the findings bring forward any new knowledge on the topic? As a final step of the cycle, the findings will then be discussed in the academic community and these discussions might lead to new investigations on the topic. (Giddens, p. 82.) Following Anthony Giddens' definitions "good sociological work tries to make the questions as precise as possible and seeks to gather factual evidence before coming to conclusions." (Giddens, p. 76.)

As a method, ethnography was the most used method of cultural anthropology in the 20th century. But since the 1980's, the method of ethnography has been criticized by scholars, who believe that ethnography, because of the insertion of self into the milieu of the research, is influenced by the assumptions of the researcher, as well as power relations, and thus ethnographic research is seen by critics as subjective inventions of cultures instead of objective representations of cultures. As a result of that critique, the norms for producing standard or mainstream ethnography have changed considerably since then. In his book *Ethnography through Thick and Thin*, George E. Marcus, a renowned American professor of anthropology at University of California, Irvine, accounts for the criticism of traditional ethnography as well as describing new approaches to reinvent the method of ethnography. "The traditional assumption in planning ethnographic research," Marcus writes, "is to make a study of something far from oneself." (Marcus, p. 14.) In the traditional approach to ethnography, the estrangement or defamiliarization could only be

achieved by crossing cultural boundaries. In an attempt to rethink the methods of ethnography, Marcus argues that "one of the most important reasons is precisely this need for ethnography to contextualize – its significance, its arguments – in terms of the sensibility and special contribution of its own distinctive practice." (Marcus, p. 13.) However, the estrangement or defamiliarization remains important in ethnography, as it is the feeling that something needs to be figured out or discovered that legitimizes the research. (Marcus, p. 16.) In relation to how one develops an ethnographic research project for a dissertation, Marcus writes that "with possible exceptions, the dissertation for the time being should take the form of a site-specific, intensively investigated and inhabited scene of fieldwork but framed and partially investigated by a multi-sited imaginary that provides the special context of significance and argument for the ethnography." (Marcus, p. 14.) By multi-sited, Marcus means research strategies that enable the ethnographer to dislocate himself from only studying one group of subjects, but instead places himself "within and between groups in direct, or even indirect and blind opposition. This is, to be sure, not a very comfortable position for the ethnographer, in which 'not taking sides' is not an option, and in which deception and betrayal are ever present possibilities." (Marcus, p. 20.) In relation to the fieldwork conducted for this thesis, there are similarities to what Marcus is arguing. As an ethnographer I placed myself between Democrats and Republicans, though, as a result of the limited time available for research, I did not place myself "within" groups. Thus, I committed myself to remain objective, even though I occasionally was asked about what the "other side" might have answered during the interviews. In relation to ethnography as the applied method for a dissertation, and with respect to the limited time frame for conducting research, Marcus argues that students should not refrain from such a project because of the delimitations. "While a multi-sited project may not be literally pursued at the dissertation level, every project should be imagined in this way. (…) This kind of disciplinary and

methodological independence is of the utmost importance now if the results of ethnography produced by anthropologists are ever to mean much." (Marcus, p. 14.)

Though the methodology for this thesis primarily follows the steps described by Giddens, there is a profound difference in the process. Instead of formulating a hypothesis before collecting data, the collected data for this thesis was used to form a theory afterwards. This method is called grounded theory – a method developed in 1967 by sociologists Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss. (Charmaz, p. 5.) The idea is to construct theories from the collected data. This means that the constructed theory is grounded within the data collected during fieldwork. "Grounded theorists collect data to develop theoretical analyses from the beginning of a project. We try to learn what occurs in the research settings we join and what our research participants' lives are like. We study how they explain their statements and actions, and ask what analytic sense we can make of them." (Charmaz, p. 3.) What this means is that, when working with grounded theory, it is the data consisting of interviews and observations that is forming our theory, whereas Giddens' approach to anthropological fieldwork is about testing a predetermined theory through interviews and observations. The inductive versus deductive research approach in other words. "Grounded theory leads us to attend to what we hear, see and sense while gathering data. As grounded theorists, we start with data. We construct these data through our observations, interactions, and materials that we gather about the topic or setting." (Charmaz, p. 3.) Grounded theory resembles the work of Katherine J. Cramer. "In this kind of work, we are seeking information about how people understand their world. We start with a guiding research question, identify a strategy to begin to answer it, and then sort through data to develop answers. We then gather more data to make sure we are drawing valid conclusions. In this way, our questions evolve as we gather data." (Cramer, p. 35.) The aim of the ethnographic work was to interview as many people as possible from both sides of the political spectrum in Sauk County. To be able to ask questions directly to those one study, is

one of the strengths of sociological research. (Giddens, p. 78.) However, a pitfall that cannot be ignored when conducting fieldwork is the fact that the interviewees can have a tendency to change their behavior or their answers, because they are aware that they are being scrutinized. This can cause the interviewees to change their answers to what they believe the researcher is looking for, or they can portray themselves and their thinking in a more positive way. (Giddens, p. 78.) In relation to this, it is also important to stress the importance of the actual wording of the questions for the interviews that the research will be based on. The research can become biased, if the researcher is asking leading questions based on his own prejudices – which is also connected to the critique of ethnography as it was described by Marcus. Alternatively, the interviewees can refuse to answer specific questions. This can cause a skewed result. Using questionnaires with a fixed wording can reduce the interview bias, though it cannot completely eliminate it. (Giddens, p. 80.) To avoid interview bias as much as possible and to construct a plan with a fixed wording for my interviews, I leaned on Katherine J. Cramer's questions that she used for her structured interviews in 27 unnamed rural communities in Wisconsin over a five year period. (Cramer, p. 233.) This helped me gain a better understanding of the values and issues people living in Sauk County are facing, but most importantly it helped me to identify some of the most polarizing factors that are causing divisions among Republicans and Democrats. For the interviews I asked the same questions and used the same wordings, though I also asked follow-up questions, if I felt it was needed. This type of qualitative interview is called a semi-structured interview, while Cramer made us of the structured interview that shares resemblances with surveys. The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to control the interview, while also giving the researcher more flexibility by allowing him to ask additional questions. In *Doing Interviews*, professor in psychology Steinar Kvale describes this type of interview the following way:

> A semi-structured life-world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives. This interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewees' lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena. It comes close to an everyday conversation, but as a professional interview it has a purpose and it involves a specific approach and technique; it is semi-structured – it is neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire. (Kvale, p. 11.)

It is recommended, especially under circumstances where it is only possible to interview the respondent once, to make use of the semi-structured approach to interviewing. Therefore, the semi-structured approach has been applied for the interviews concerning this thesis. The questions for the interviews were framed so that the answers could shed a light on the values and beliefs of the interviewees, and help this thesis identify which factors are causing the polarization between Republicans and Democrats in Sauk County. Kvale describes the aim of the interview as understanding the *life world* of the respondents:

> The topic of qualitative research interviews is the interviewee's lived everyday world. The interview is a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world. Interviews allow the subjects to convey to others their situation from their own perspective and in their own words. (Kvale, p. 11.)

However, a pitfall of doing fieldwork is the risk of not being able to interview as many people from the group as desired due to unforeseen practical difficulties. This can also create a bias in the research. (Giddens, p. 80.) To avoid this scenario, I had reached out to the local branches of Republicans and Democrats prior to travelling to Sauk County. This helped me to get in touch with people who were interested in meeting with me, though in practice it turned out to be difficult to set

up interviews within my timeframe - despite being in contact with more than 20 people before and during my stay. In total, within the time frame available for field work, I conducted ten interviews. This was the target set in accordance with my supervisor, though ideally it would have strengthened this thesis, if I had been able to conduct more interviews. In *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Kathy Charmaz writes that "12 interviews suffice for most researchers when they aim to discern themes concerning common views and experiences among relatively homogeneous people." (Charmaz, p. 107.) Using Charmaz' own wording, I will argue that my interviewees in Sauk County are part of a homogenous group as the research has been carried out within a clearly defined geographical area. A weakness in the conducted research is the lack of diversity with regards to gender and age. Out of the ten interviews, I interviewed nine men and one woman, all of whom were deemed "white Americans" with an average age of 58,5 years - the oldest being 74 years old and the youngest 24. In this way, the interviewees for this thesis bear similarities with the groups that Cramer interviewed for her book on political resentment. For Cramer's research, there was a majority of white, retired men. However, an explanation to some extent can be found in the 2012 Census survey where 18,5 percent of the population in Sauk County were 65 years or older and 95,2 percent of the population were "white alone". 50,1 percent of the total population of 61,976 in Sauk County were women. (Census, 2012). Another weak point in the research is the fact that the interviewees were never asked about their yearly income. This means that this thesis will not be able to claim any correlation between income and political orientation. Additionally, the interviewees were never asked about their view on immigration, another issue that is presumably also very polarized, and thus this thesis is not able to claim any correlation in this regard either.

Another great inspiration for the methodological approach has been Harvard University sociologist Matthew Desmond's book *Evicted* – a story about extreme poverty in Milwaukee. He writes about his method that he lived in Milwaukee when conducting his research, and that he

conducted hundreds of interviews and took thousands of photographs. Writing about his project, there are several similarities with grounded theory. “I began this project with a set of questions to pursue, but lines of inquiry flexed and waned as my fieldwork progressed. Some would not have sprung to mind had I never set foot in the field. (Desmond, p. 332.) Desmond’s focus was Milwaukee, the largest city in Wisconsin - and with some of the poorest areas in the state. The reasons for focusing on Milwaukee resonates well with how this thesis is focusing on Sauk County as a microcosmos of modern American society. Desmond’s reasoning is that:

> Milwaukee is a fairly typical midsize metropolitan area with a fairly typical socioeconomic profile and housing market and fairly typical renter protections. It is far better suited to represent the experience of city dwellers living in Indianapolis, Minneapolis, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Gary, Raleigh, Utica, and other cities left out of the national conversation because they are not America’s biggest successes (San Francisco, New York City) or biggest failures (Detroit, Newark). (Desmond, p. 333.)

In much the same way this thesis will argue that Sauk County, with its mixture of both rural, farming communities and the more urban sprawl around Baraboo, is better suited to represent the experience of people living in the Midwest than for example Madison, Des Moines or Chicago.

Desmond also explains his deliberate decision not to use first-person narration in his book – despite that “first-person accounts convey experience – and experience, authority.” (Desmond, p. 334.) Desmond argues that the first-person narration is moving focus away from the issue. “No matter how much care the author takes, the first-person ethnography becomes just as much about the fieldworker as about anything she or he saw.” (Desmond, p. 334.) Desmond’s choice is in contrast with the traditional works of ethnography where the observer takes up a lot of space in

telling the story. The reason for this was that it was believed that the researcher could present what was studied in an objective way. But whereas Desmond has made a deliberate choice not to use "I" in his book, Giddens' argues that there can be good reasons to use "I". "It might be a matter of trying to consider how one's race or gender affected the work, or how the power differences between the observer and observed distorted the dialogue between them." (Giddens, p. 86.) A researcher must be aware of the implications that factors such as gender and race can have on the conducted data. To avoid any bias as a result of my gender or race, I have attempted to come across as impartial as possible. This means that I have resorted to only ask open questions and present myself as objective and neutral as possible by not correcting or challenging the interviewees in any way. To help myself blend in, I was aware of my clothes and thus chose to dress casual wearing jeans, a t-shirt and a jumper for my interviews. I also used my own story to build a relation to my interviewees, so that I could get more honest answers during the interviews. When I was interviewing rural people and farmers, I would tell them that I grew up on a farm, and that my uncle runs a large dairy farm. When an interviewee, who was a widow, was hesitant to speak while I recorded the interview, I told her that I myself had lost my father. We found a common ground, and the interview could continue. Following Kvale's recommendations for setting the interview stage, I also began every interview by briefing the interviewees about the purpose of my research, that the interview would be recorded, and that they were free to ask questions concerning the interview. Additionally, each interview was followed by a debriefing, allowing the interviewee to reflect on the experience and raising potential concerns. (Kvale, p. 56.)

Discussion

The following section offers a short description of the ten interviewees that make up the foundation for this thesis. All interviewees for this thesis are deemed "white Americans". On the basis of the

interviews, it is evident that religion is important to the interviewees. In general the interviewees emphasize nature and wildlife as a positive trait for the county. Many of them have experienced how politics have caused polarization in their families or in friendships, and thus to a great extent they socialize with like-minded individuals. This further impacts the trend of polarization in the community. The dominant polarizing factors identified from these interviews are value-based political issues such as abortion, second amendment rights, health care and climate change. Other highly polarizing factors are the differing opinions on president Trump and political opponents. It is also important to point out the differences in media habits among the interviewees. The interviewed Democrats tended to watch CNN, ABC and MSNBC while reading newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. Republicans tended to watch Fox News and read fewer or no newspapers at all. Subsequently, these themes and tendencies from the ten interviews conducted among people living in Sauk County will be varied and elaborated by using existing research on the topic of political polarization in The United States.

Description of interviewees

- Bill, 74, retired teacher. Lives in a house in central Baraboo. Catholic. Democrat.
- Brian, 58, farmer. Lives on a farm in Loganville. Lutheran. Republican.
- Dan, 71, retired teacher. Lives on a small farm ten kilometers north of Baraboo. Protestant. Democrat.
- Dave, 67, state representative for the 81st assembly district. Former teacher and farmer. Lives on a farm east of Baraboo. Methodist. Democrat.
- Jeremy, 24, recently graduated from college. Lives in a rented apartment in Baraboo. Judeo-Christian. Leans Republican.

- Jim, 47, works part-time for Sauk County as a web administrator. Veteran. Lives in central Baraboo. Agnostic. Green.
- Marcia, 68, lives on a farm in Lime Ridge. Retired. Owned her own food business service. Undefined Christian. Republican.
- Sam, 53, works as an unskilled laborer for the city of Madison – former sheriff. Lives in a house in central Baraboo. Atheist. Democrat.
- Tom, 70, retired county agricultural agent for the University Wisconsin-Extension. Lives on a farm east of Baraboo. Non-religious. Democrat.
- Tony, 53, state representative for the 50th assembly district. Veteran. Lives on an organic farm in Wonewoc. Mormon. Republican.

Views on abortion

To understand why the issue of abortion is so deeply rooted in the public debate in America, it is important to understand the American culture wars on a general level. "Culture wars" can be characterized as "conflict over issues that are rooted in nonnegotiable conceptions of cultural and moral order." (Mouw & Sobel, p. 915.) The conflicts that make up the cultural wars "stem from a breakdown of the old denominational religious loyalties in America, with the traditional denominations splitting along a crosscutting conservative/liberal or orthodox/progressive divide that threatens the normative consensus." (Mouw & Sobel, p. 915.) Within an American frame of reference, culture war is commonly used to describe hot button issues such as abortion, homosexuality, pornography, gun control, and recreational drug use. The orthodox side has the belief that only God knows right and wrong, while the progressives argue that morality is a human construct. According to Mouw and Sobel, there is no common ground between the orthodox and the progressives, and thus it becomes harder to compromise. "Unable to negotiate between these

competing moral views, debate thereby ceases to be an attempt to convince the opposition with reason and becomes instead a struggle for the power to impose a particular moral order." (Mouw & Sobel, p. 915.) Professor of history at Illinois State University Andrew Hartmann refers to these two competing world views as normative America and the new America. (Hartmann, 2015, p. 6.) Hartmann describes "normative Americans" as people who valued hard work, personal responsibility, and individual merit. They lived in heterosexual marriages and behaved in ways consistent with traditional gender roles. The men worked outside the home, while the women stayed at home and looked after the children. Normative Americans believed that the United States was the best nation in the world, and they assumed that the nation's, in their opinion, unique character was the result of its Judeo-Christian heritage. In contrast, the new America, which was more pluralistic, secular, and feminist, emerged in the 1960's and grew from of the "ruins" of normative America. (Hartmann, 2015, p. 5.) Thus, the culture war was, and remains to be, a conflict between the orthodox, normative America and the progressive, new America. In relation to the issue of abortion, it became a hot button issue as part of the rights revolution in the seventies, when a series of new laws and judicial rulings created major, lasting changes to the American society. (Berkowitz, p. 7.) Abortion had been an important issue in the women's rights movement throughout the century, but from the beginning of the 20th century until 1970, all states had made abortion illegal. However, by the end of the sixties, 14 states had passed laws that allowed for abortions in specific circumstances such as rape, deformity of the fetus or if the mother's life was is risk. The passing of these laws underlined that abortion was as much a health issue as a moral issue. (Berkowitz, p. 145.) By the beginning of the seventies, the tide began to turn, and by 1971 four states had allowed women to have abortions on demand – among them were Washington and New York, which in practice meant that abortion had become legal in the United States because so many women would travel there for an abortion. Within the first nine months, more than 100,000 legal abortions were performed in the

state of New York. (Berkowitz, p. 146.) On January 22, 1973, the Supreme Court reached its decision in the case of Roe v. Wade. By the votes seven to two, the Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Constitution protects a pregnant woman's right to choose to have an abortion without excessive government restriction. According to the Supreme Court's verdict, during the first three months of a pregnancy, abortion was a private matter between the woman and her doctor. (Berkowitz, p. 146.) The ruling also permitted states to pass laws that made abortions in the last trimester illegal – except in cases where the mother's health or life was at risk. The Supreme Court ruling brought the issue of issue of abortion out into the open. Women's rights advocates were enthusiastic while it caused an outcry among those who were opposed to it. Especially the Catholic Church was against the ruling of legalizing abortion, and thus the church increased its participation and visibility in the anti-abortion campaign. This involvement was not well received among abortion-right advocates who "argued that the heavy involvement of the Catholic Church in the debate violated the American conception of the separation of church and state." (Berkowitz, p. 147.) Meanwhile, the anti-abortion movement lobbied on a state level to pass laws that would restrict abortion as much as possible within the frame of the Supreme Court ruling. The lobbying resulted in the Hyde Amendment which was passed in September 1976. The amendment banned federal funding for abortions. In practice it meant that "people who received federally funded health care, such as people on welfare, could not receive abortions." (Berkowitz, p. 148.) According to the Guttmacher Institute, a research and policy organization working on advancing sexual and reproductive rights in the United States, more and more states have adopted anti-abortion laws. "Between January 1, 2011 and July 1, 2019, states enacted 483 new abortion restrictions, and these account for nearly 40 percent of all abortion restrictions enacted by states in the decades since Roe v. Wade." (Guttmacher Institute, 2020.) These statistics indicate that the Roe v. Wade is under pressure in the United States, where 862,320 abortions were performed in 2017 – 6,360 of those were carried out in Wisconsin, where there are

six facilities that perform abortions. In total, 97 percent of the 72 counties in Wisconsin did not have any clinics that provided abortions in 2017 – in these areas lived 70 percent of the women in Wisconsin. On a national level 89 percent of the U.S. counties did not have clinics that provided abortions in 2017. In addition, there are several restrictions on abortion in Wisconsin. For example, a woman who wishes to have an abortion, must receive counseling that, according to critics, is designed to discourage the woman from having the abortion, and then wait 24 hours before the procedure is carried out. The woman must also undergo an ultrasound before having the abortion, and the provider must show and describe the image to the patient. (Guttmacher Institute, 2020.)

This development can partly be explained with the growing influence of the evangelical Christians in the 1980's. Prior to this, evangelical Christians, though accounting for a third of the U.S. population, had not attempted to make an impact on the American public life. But that changed when Jimmy Carter, a Democrat and an evangelical, was elected president in 1976, and *Newsweek* magazine declared that the "year of the evangelical." In hindsight its quite an understatement to only label it the *year* of the evangelical since both Carter, Clinton, and George W. Bush were evangelical presidents, while evangelicals played a pivotal role in the elections of both Reagan, Bush senior, as well as Donald Trump. (Cochran, p. 91.) As previously mentioned, the Supreme Court's ruling on Roe v. Wade in 1973 resulted in a clamor among pro-lifers – not at least the evangelical Christians. "Until that time, evangelical attention to abortion had been limited and mixed, but evangelicals reacted strongly to the Roe decision. Abortion has been the driving concern behind much evangelical political involvement since that time." (Cochran, p. 95.) Since the 1980's, evangelical Christian voters have been an indispensable source of support for Republican presidential candidates. A conjunction on issues like abortion has occurred between Republican and evangelicals, and in terms of winning elections evangelical voters make up a substantial part of the vote:

> The National Association of Evangelicals is a voice for its 30,000,000 members, who make up a quarter of the American electorate, and a leading organization of the religious right with a political voice. This is true too of the Christian Coalition, which supported some 36 senators and 243 members of the House of Representatives. (Hochschild, p. 123.)

According to a Pew Research Center survey, about one in four American voters belongs to an evangelical Christian denomination. That makes evangelicals the most common religious group – only exceeded by voters without religious affiliation. (Husser, 2020.)

For this thesis the interviewees were asked about their views on abortion. Seven of the ten interviewees mentioned that religion was very important to them, and thus it was likely to assume that the majority of them would be opposed to abortion. To varying degrees, the majority of Democrats interviewed for this thesis supported abortion rights, while the Republicans tended to be against abortion. Jim, who identifies as Green, describes himself as pro-choice, and so does 71-year old Dan, a Democrat, who was very outspoken about his support for abortion:

> I'm for Roe v. Wade. I think a woman has the right to choose over her body. Those guys calls themselves pro-life, but here is the thing: once the kid is born, you don't care about education, you don't care about health care, you don't care about all this kinda stuff. What kinda life is it that you are pro-life on? Once a person gets out of the womb, you don't care crap about them. I think there should be few abortions. I think that everyone should have access to birth control. Lots of the abortion people don't want them to have any type of birth control at all, and they have this crazy idea that every time you have sex, you should have a baby. You should be paying for em' and all this kinda stuff. I mean, they're nuts. And they'll

> take a gun and go into a church and shoot down a doctor, cause' he's an abortion doctor. Or they'll blow up an abortion clinic and kill some people. They're violent. They can take whatever they want from the Bible and twist it however they want.

24-year old Jeremy, who leans Republican, is more in favor of letting the state decide if abortion should be legal or not:

> Personally, I think it should be up to a state to decide whether or not they want it to be legal in their state. I myself lean against - mostly on the argument on where do you draw a line from when it becomes a fetus to when it becomes a human being. And the fact that you can't really draw a nice neat line, where one day it's a fetus and the next day it's a human being, I air on the side of pro-life because you just can' take the risk of harming a human being in my opinion.

Bill, 74, is Catholic and thus, in correlation with what has been accounted for previously, he struggles with abortion. Instead of having an abortion, he wants society to be more supportive around the women and eventually take away their fear of having the child:

> The county they now have a program for visiting nurses for first time mothers. That sort of thing which encourages, well, takes away the fear of the woman. I think that's where I'm at. Can we work on the positive side, daycare etc., and try and come up with a system that's supportive of the family.

Tom, 70, is thinking along the same lines as Bill on the subject of abortion. “Why don't we really make an effort to reduce the amount of unwanted pregnancies? Because, frankly, in the discussions I've seen, I've never heard anybody say that. If we don't have an unwanted pregnancy, abortion never is an issue,” Tom says. While Bill and Tom favor an approach that reduces unwanted pregnancies in an attempt to have fewer abortion, Marcia, 68, describes her Christian faith as her guideline in living, and thus she is against abortion. “I'm a Christian. Probably I'm first a Christian, an American and maybe Republican. I'm God-centered,” she says. Sam was raised as Catholic, but today he describes himself as being an atheist. He has no problem with abortion:

> I would be okay with late term abortions. I don't find that inappropriate. I do think there should be exceptions for the woman's life and so forth, but I think that's largely between the doctor, the woman and maybe her family. I don't think the government should be dictating in detail. And part of the reason why I find the right, the political right, stance on abortion to be flawed, is they speak about the most important thing is the life of a child and so forth. But when it comes to a child living in poverty, struggling to find food, they don't give a damn.

But more than anything, Sam is of the opinion that abortion is a tool used by politicians to activate their base:

> I find abortion to be a wholly political issue. I see it as someone realized that for politicians to make their argument, they will always have a political sway that can draw people to their side and support them. Knowing that they'll never truly achieve what they’re after. But the point is that, not achieving it now, is a way to ensure that they keep getting elected. If you get people to support you that way and you get elected, you can do all these other things for

> your benefit and people won't turn on you because they are distracted by this issue over here. That's how I look at abortion.

Dave, 67, who is a Democrat and the state representative for the 81st assembly district, explains that he feels torn between his personal belief about abortion and his party's policy:

> I personally think that abortion is wrong. It is one those things that I think is wrong, but I refuse to judge somebody else for putting myself in their shoes and make that decision for them. (…) I feel my job as a representative, and I will fight to do this, and I lose votes because of it all the time, is to... I leave that decision to the woman, her family and her God.

Tony, 53, a Republican and the state representative for the 50th assembly district, says that he is pro-life. Brian, 58, shares this view on abortion, though there are cases where he would consider it to be okay to have an abortion. "I don't think you should be aborting babies, but I guess I would leave it up to the individual person per certain reasons: incest, rape, something like that. If the mother's life is in danger. I would say it's between that person, the physician and their preacher," Brian says.

As the analysis shows, the Democrats interviewed for this thesis are generally leaning towards pro-choice, while the Republican interviewees are pro-life. To understand how the issue of abortion speaks to an increase in partisan polarization, we must go back to Baldassari and Gelman, who described how the public opinion in America has become more moderate on many political issues since the seventies, though on the issue of abortion the population holds increasingly more extreme positions today. (Baldassarri, p. 410.) As Fiorina and Abrams argues, the partisan polarization increases when a population moves from one consensual state to its opposite. "An interesting feature of trend analysis is that polarization will increase when a population moves from

one consensual state to its opposite." (Fiorina, p. 567.) This movement away from consensus is exactly what has happened in the United States on the issue of abortion. Since 1975 Gallup has surveyed the opinion on abortion among Republicans, Democrats and independent voters. The surveys show that the Republican opposition to abortion has increased since then, while Democrats have become slightly more supporting of women's rights to abortion. In 1975, 18 percent of Republicans answered that abortion should be legal under any circumstances. 25 percent said it should be illegal under any circumstances, while 55 percent said it should be legal under certain circumstances. In 2019, the amount of Republicans that believed that abortion should be legal under any circumstances had decreased to 12 percent, while the percentage of Republicans that said abortion should be illegal under any circumstances had increased to 32 percent. 55 percent believed it should be legal under certain circumstances. For Democrats the development is the complete opposite, which highlights how the issue of polarization has become perhaps even more polarizing over time in the United States. As the statistics show, Republicans and Democrats answered fairly identically on the survey in 1975, but has grown apart since then. In 1975, 19 percent of Democrats answered that abortion should be legal under any circumstances. 26 percent said it should be illegal under any circumstances, while 51 percent said it should be legal under certain circumstances. In 2019, the amount of Democrats who believed that abortion should be legal under any circumstances had increased to 39 percent, while the percentage of Democrats that said abortion should be illegal under any circumstances had decreased to 14 percent. 45 percent believed it should be legal under certain circumstances. The same development is evident in the distribution of those who identify as either pro-life or pro-choice. In 1995, 42 percent of Republicans and 58 percent of Democrats identified as pro-choice, while 51 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats identified as pro-life. In 2019, 21 percent of Republicans and 68 percent of Democrats identified as pro-choice, while 75 percent of Republicans and 29 percent of Democrats identified as pro-life. (Gallup, 2019.)

Views on homosexuality

As it has already been established, the deepening partisan polarization in the United States, and consequently in Sauk County, is the result of a continual culture war between the orthodox, normative America and the progressive, new America. However, the culture war was not only fought over the issue of abortion, but also on equality for all genders, races, and sexual minorities. This continual fight for equal rights is evident in the gradual change in the American public opinion on homosexuality and LGBTQ rights over the last five decades. From the traditional American nuclear family of the fifties and sixties, rooted in conservative Christian ideals, which consisted of one man, one woman, and several children. (Hartmann, 2015, p. 134.) To the fluid non-binary gender identities that are prevalent today. In the sixties, homosexuality was still viewed as a psychiatric disability which could be cured with psychiatric treatment – and not an identity. Organizations such as The New York Academy of Medicine regarded homosexuality as a disease that endangered society. (Berkowitz, p. 149.) Homosexuality was condemned by The Catholic Church because it "excludes all possibility of transmission of life." (Berkowitz, p. 150.) As the analysis will show, homosexuality is still an issue today for Catholics like Bill. With such strong opposition to gay rights it was a well-known truth that gay people had fewer rights than other Americans. "Two gay people who sought to marry were not allowed to do so. Homosexuals also faced discrimination when they went to buy a house or apply for a job." (Berkowitz, p. 150.) According to Berkowitz, "gays wanted only an end to legal discrimination." (Berkowitz, p. 150.) The Stonewall Riots, a series of violent protests that broke out in Greenwich Village in New York City on June 28th 1969, after the police had raided the known gay bar Stonewall, became a catalyst for the LGBTQ movement. At that time more than 65 percent of Americans believed homosexuals to be "harmful to society." (Berkowitz, p. 151.) In the seventies the LGBTQ movement began to

gain momentum. Unjust practices such as prohibiting homosexuals from working in public schools were successfully lobbied against, and gay-pride marches spread across the country. “In response, cities passed ordinances that granted equal protection to homosexuals, and, between 1969 and 1973, six states removed laws that banned sex between two members of the same sex from their books.” (Berkowitz, p. 152.) Though there are backlashes to any movement or change in society, being gay became a recognized category or identity during the seventies. “Gay rights lingered into the eighties as a controversial issue with the potential to drive a wedge between liberals and conservatives, culturally permissive and cultural proscriptive people. Nonetheless, it gained a permanent place on the American political agenda during the seventies that it never lost.” (Berkowitz, p. 153.) Berkowitz alludes to the polarizing effect that the issue of homosexuality and LGBTQ rights has on the American political landscape. With regards to Sauk County, overall the interviewees were accepting of homosexuality – only two answered that they believed it to be wrong. Jeremy, who is the youngest of the interviewees, doesn’t consider himself to be a religious person, but he is raised with Christian values. Asked what he thinks about homosexuality, he says he has nothing against it:

> While I myself am not homosexual, I see no reason why I should have a problem with two individuals who love each other that just happen to be of the same sex. I have several friends that are gay and they are fantastic individuals to be around. That is something, I think, in the United States, that we are slowly getting over.

Like Jeremy, most young Americans support acceptance of homosexuality. Of those between the age of 18 and 29 – Jeremy’s age group – 83 percent say homosexuality should be accepted by society. From 30 to 49 its 72 percent, from 50 to 64 its 65 percent, and from 65 and upwards its 58 percent that say homosexuality should be accepted. Acceptance of homosexuality is also greater

among those with postgraduate (81 percent) and bachelor's (77 percent) degrees than among those with some (69 percent) or no college experience (64 percent). (Pew, 2017, p. 43.) Bill, 74, who has a college degree, describes himself as being tolerant towards homosexuals, though he admits that it's a big change from his Catholic upbringing:

> I guess I might say I'm kinda like tolerant. I don't know anybody personally that's been married. I know several at work. (...) I feel that's who they are and I just recognize that and take it for what they think is themselves. I think that's a real problem, that you can't accept the other person as being different. And to me, with my upbringing, I'm a Catholic from way back, it's a big shift. It's huge.

Sam says that a person's sexual orientation does not matter to him. "I couldn't care less if someone's homosexual. I mean, as a straight man people don't ask how I have sex with my wife. Why would you ask why or how gay men have sex? It's just not anyone's business as long as you're consenting adult." Tom, 70, believes homosexuality is a natural condition, while Marcia, 68, is against it because of her religious beliefs:

> Everybody's gotta live their life how they feel fit for themselves. The fact that I do go by what I know from the Bible, you know, it's something that I wouldn't feel right with, but then who am I to cast the first stone? My life isn't perfect either and I try to make myself happy. Everybody has to answer to their own conscience and their own God.

Brian is also against homosexuality because of his religious beliefs. "My religious beliefs are that it's against God. God created man and woman, and that's the way it should be. That's what I

believe." Like Brian and Marcia, both Dave and Tony ascribes religion as something that is very important in their lives, but they both also have close relatives that are homosexuals. "In our state we allow same sex marriage. I guess, I really haven't paid much attention to it. I don't have a problem with somebody's sexuality. To be honest with you, I haven't told you my son is gay, so I don't have an issue with that," says Tony. Dave sees it the same way:

> Let me frame it by saying that my brother, who died, was homosexual, and I watched him being persecuted by my family. Almost thrown out of the family and basically was for a while. I don't know what the root of homosexuality is, and I don't wanna make that judgement. I think that person is being true to themselves, and they should be allowed to be true to themselves. I think that's what's most important.

The acceptance of homosexuality and LGBTQ minorities among the interviewees is consistent with the general public opinion on the issue in America. Over the last 20 years there has been a significant shift in the public opinion on homosexuality in the United States, and in Wisconsin same-sex marriage has been legal since October 6th, 2014. According to a 2014 survey on Republicans view on homosexuality, 52 percent of Republicans or Republican leaning in Wisconsin said that homosexuality should be accepted. 44 percent said it should be discouraged. (Pew, 2014.) A survey from 2017 concludes that 70 percent of all Americans now say homosexuality should be accepted by society, while 24 percent say it should be discouraged by society. While the majority of both Democrats and Republicans are accepting homosexuality today, Democrats remain more likely than Republicans to say homosexuality should be accepted by society. 83 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents say homosexuality should be accepted by society, while only 13 percent say it should be discouraged. That is a significant change from 1994 where only 54 percent

of Democrats were of the opinion that homosexuality should be accepted. Among Republican and Republican leaners today, 54 percent believes homosexuality should be accepted by society while 37 percent believe it should be discouraged. In 1994, 38 percent of Republicans believed homosexuality should be accepted by society. (Pew, 2017, p. 42.) Though both groups have become more accepting of homosexuality since 1994, the partisan differences have grown. From 54 percent of Democrats and 38 percent of Republicans in 1994 - to 83 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of Republicans in 2017 saying that homosexuality should be accepted by society. This shows how the issue of homosexuality have become more polarizing in the American society, despite more Americans being accepting of homosexuals.

Views on gun control

The debate on guns is another example of the culture wars of the seventies that is reaching into the United States of America today. Thus, it is an important factor to scrutinize in an attempt to identify which factors are contributing to the increasing political polarization. The second amendment of the United States Constitution reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." For decades the amendment has been subject to different interpretations, and over the last decades, the relationship between gun owners and non-gun owners has become increasingly polarized. But according to Andrew Hartman, one particular tragedy, where 13 people were killed, has made the gun issue the most polarizing in contemporary America – the Columbine High School Massacre in April 1999:

> During the 1980s and 1990s—the heyday of the culture wars—guns rarely ascended to the top of any roster of leading flashpoints in the conflict. But then in 1999 came Columbine,

> the first school massacre, followed by a wave of mass shootings. Almost twenty years later, guns may be the single most divisive issue in American politics. (Hartman, 2018, p. 4.)

As it has been accounted for in relation to abortion and homosexuality, the issue of guns is a reflection of competing versions of the United States of America – between the orthodox, normative America and the progressive, new America as it was described by Hartman, and Mouw and Sobel. Polarization on gun issues has also been described as a consequence of the contrasting worldviews of gun rights supporters who are more individualistic and gun opponents who are more egalitarian. (Joslyn, p. 383.) Research even concludes that possessing a gun increases the likelihood of voting for a Republican candidate at elections. (Joslyn, p. 382.) ~~In~~ *Emerging Political Identities? Gun Ownership and Voting in Presidential Elections*, Mark R. Joslyn et al. describes these competing views the following way:

> Gun control supporters, who are disproportionally urban, Democrat, liberal, female, and African American, perceive guns as symbols of power, inequality, hierarchy, force at the expense of reason, and a neglect of fellow citizens' safety. For gun rights supporters, largely rural, male, Republican, and conservative, guns signify American core values of freedom, individual self- sufficiency, virtue, and citizenship. Gun ownership strengthens these core values and is central to individual and group identity. Attacks on gun ownership are therefore received as deeply personal, threating to gun owners' values, families, communities, and way of life. The gun debate is then a matter of clashing cultural styles; it is about what guns mean as opposed to what guns do. (Joslyn, p. 382.)

The history of guns in America is invariably linked to the American ideal of independence and individualism, and the gun itself has become of a symbol of the self-sufficient, righteous, and independent American cowboy who conquered the frontier. Gun owners are seen as opponents to a culture where the American is dependent on the government. Instead, gun owners believe in the normative America, as described by Hartman, where anyone, through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, can achieve the American dream and advance in society. Thus, gun owners are thought of as someone who fights to protect individual rights and freedoms – not least the Second Amendment to the American Constitution. (Joslyn, p. 383.) Subsequently, gun culture in America is connected to the Republican Party, which has fought against stricter gun control since the sixties, and "government intrusion into private lives of citizens, staunch support of self-sufficiency, and personal responsibility, fits well with the gun ethos. Hunting, sport shooting, and associated activities are central to the culture." (Joslyn, p. 384.) In contrast, the support for more gun control measures is connected to the Democratic Party, and thus those who do not own guns are more likely to vote Democratic:

> Since the New Deal Era Republicans have increasingly stressed conservative values such as individualism, personal responsibility, and limited government. These values match well with those of gun owners and gun advocacy groups. Meanwhile, nongun owners gravitated toward the more communal, egalitarian elements of the liberal Democratic Party wing. (Joslyn, p. 385.)

According to Joslyn et al., "rural residents, conservatives, and Republicans are more likely to possess firearms and prefer Republican presidential candidates." (Joslyn, p. 388.) To some degree this correlates with findings from Sauk County, where Dave, despite being a Democrat, is much

more aligned with Tony, Jeremy and Brian on the subject of gun control. Dave is a rural resident and a farmer who owns five guns. They are not locked in a cabinet, and they are stored together with the ammunition. According to Dave, guns are a normal part of life on many farms in the area, and thus he is torn on the question of having stricter gun control or not:

> I don't wanna take anyone's guns away, and I would fight that tooth and nail. I don't really care personally, but I don't want us to have a register of who has guns or not. I don't see any point in that. I do think we need to do background checks before we sell guns. I think we need to have waiting periods before you get - especially - a handgun. I think we need to limit the size of capacity on gun magazines. (...) I walk this fine line. Do I think that cities should be able to have stricter gun laws than what we have in the country? Yeah. But the last thing I'm going to do is make some of my neighbors or myself a criminal. I know a lot of farmers who have a .22 propped up in the corner of the shed to shoot vermin.

Brian is one of those farmers who Dave does not want to make a criminal due to stricter gun regulation. Guns have always been a part of life on the farm for Brian, and he wants to keep it that way. "I'm all for the second amendment. I truly believe we have the right to carry arms, bear arms and protect ourselves. I don't think some politician in Washington or Madison should be able to tell us what kind of gun I can or can't have, and when I can and can't use it." Analyzing Brian's answer, it shares resemblances with how Joslyn et al. described that attacks on gun ownership are understood as being deeply personal, and threating to the gun owner's values, family, and way of life. (Joslyn, p. 382.) Brian owns several guns, and for him it is a way of protecting himself and his family out on the farm. "I don't have any AR's yet, but I'd like one. I have shotguns, I have one pistol, I have deer rifles. I don't have one sitting here in the corner now, but I'm never not too far

from a loaded gun. My life has been threatened before, so...” Tony is an army veteran. During his time in the military he was deployed in Germany, Korea and Iraq. He owns guns, and describes himself as a “big believer in the second amendment.” But in Tony’s opinion it is not the weapons that are dangerous. Instead, he thinks it is important to focus on the mental health in the United States – especially among veterans:

> Weapons don't kill people. Somebody has to pull those triggers, and we, in our country particularly, we have a horrible mental health problem. And that's something I think we have to finally address as a nation and as a state: how do we address mental health? Because to me that's the underlying cause of a lot of these issues that we have with guns or knives or machetes or what have you.

In 2014, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health estimated that 4.6 percent of the adult population in Wisconsin suffered from a serious mental illness – slightly below the 5.0 percent nationally. (DHS.) Sam worked in law enforcement for seven years as a sheriff in Dane County, but even though guns were part of his working life, he does not own any guns today. Like Tony, Sam, a Democrat, is worried about the mental health in America, but instead he favors more regulation on guns. That Sam as a Democrat is supporting stronger control on guns, is consistent with what was accounted for by Joslyn et al.:

> I'm okay with limited gun regulations or ban certain things, limiting so forth. I ultimately think that America's problems with guns has nothing to do with regulation, but it's our culture. We love talking about guns, we love guns. We find that guns can be a solution to everything. The number of men who commit suicide with guns kinda points it out.

Statistics from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention show that 47,173 Americans died by suicide in 2017 making it the tenth leading cause of death in the country. White males accounted for 69.67 percent of the suicide deaths that year and firearms were used for 50.57 percent of all suicide deaths. For 2017 in total, it is estimated that there were 1.4 million suicide attempts in the United States. Guns are also part of the culture in Sauk County, as there are strong traditions for hunting in Wisconsin. For the gun deer season in 2018, more than 545,000 hunters purchased a license. (Davenport, 2018.) There is no minimum age for hunting in Wisconsin as long as the child is accompanied by a guardian in a mentored hunt. From the age of 12 children can purchase a hunting license and hunt with a gun in company with a guardian. From the age of 14, children can hunt alone in Wisconsin if they pass a hunter education course. (Richmond, 2017.)

In relation to gun culture, hunting, sport shooting, and associated activities are central to the culture. (Joslyn, p. 384.) As a hunter Jeremy, who owns weapons himself, finds it hard to acknowledge those who want stricter gun control in the United States, because, in his opinion, they do not have enough knowledge about the guns they want to limit the access to:

> I certainly understand why a lot of people push for gun control deeply. But I find it hard to take a lot of these peoples arguments very seriously, because a lot of them, and I mean a lot of them, are very misinformed on guns in general and don't have a good knowledge base to make these arguments from - meaning that I have a hard time taking their arguments in good faith.

Democrats Dan and Bill are among those who favor stricter regulations on guns. Bill is of the opinion that the Supreme Court has misread the second amendment of the United States Constitution. “Each state had a militia, well-regulated, wasn't an individual right at all because they didn't want a national army, they didn't want a defense department because they had their experience with the British army which was of course huge and well-regulated,” Bill says. Thus, he favors more regulations on guns. So does Dan. “I'm getting fed up with that crap. It's ridiculous. I own guns but people who are crazy should not be allowed to own guns - especially assault weapons. They should have no guns. Period.” Both Tom and Marcia do not own guns themselves. Jim thought about getting a gun, but finally he decided not to. “I've considered buying one just, you know, to learn the skill, but what I've found is that as soon as someone gets a gun, they get brain damage.” Like Dan and Bill, Jim is a strong supporter for more regulation on guns. “I support all the common sense reforms. Background checks, get rid of the loop holes, no guns for abusers and violent people and that sort of stuff. I mean, blind people should not be able to get a gun permit,” says Jim.

As shown by Joslyn et al., the issue of the right to carry arms has been a strongly divisive issue for generations, and as the analysis of the interviews show, it is evident that the issue of second amendment rights and stricter gun control is also a hot button issue among the interviewees. As shown, all interviewees tended to have strong opinions on the subject, though it is too simplified to merely attribute the differences in opinion solely to partisan differences. Instead, the analysis also finds that where people live, impact their opinion on gun control. To some degree, those among the interviewees who live in more rural areas tend to be stronger advocates for the Second Amendment right to own and carry guns. Ultimately though, all Democratic interviews, as well as Jim (Green), advocated for stronger gun control, while the Republicans defended the Second Amendment. A

survey from Pew Research Center, conducted in September 2019, found that the overall share of Americans who say that gun laws should be made stricter has increased from 52 percent in 2017 to 60 percent as of last year. Likewise, the share of Americans saying that gun laws should be less strict has dropped from 18 percent in 2017 to 11 percent in 2019. (Schaeffer, 2019.) However, looking at the opinion on gun control among Democrats and Republicans, it is clear that the issue of gun control has very sharp partisan divides. The survey found that in September 2019, 86 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters favored stricter gun laws, while only 31 percent of Republican and Republican-leaners felt that way. Among Democrats the support for stricter gun laws has risen 11 percentage points since 2017, while the support among Republicans has risen seven percentage points. This shows that the partisan gap on gun control has increased nationally among Democrats and Republicans with four percentage points from 2017 to 2019. This is further confirmed by the fact that in 2010, 65 percent of Republicans said that gun rights were more important than gun control, while 33 percent of Democrats held this view. In 2019, these differences had increased dramatically – 80 percent of Republicans and only 21 percent of Democrats answered that gun rights were more important than gun control. (Schaeffer, 2019.) All in all, the survey from Pew Research Center and the interviews from Sauk County, suggests that the issue of gun control versus gun rights has become increasingly sorted along partisan lines. Thus, Republicans favor gun rights, while Democrats favor gun control.

Views on climate change

According to Hochschild, politics is the single biggest factor determining views on climate change among Americans. “This split has widened because the right has moved right, not because the left has moved left.” (Hochschild, p. 7.) A study from Pew Research Center finds that Republicans, who strongly approve of Trump’s job performance, are more like than those who approve of him less

strongly to say there is no solid evidence of rising global temperatures. 57 percent of those who strongly support Trump's job performance say there is no solid evidence of rising temperatures, while 65 percent of Republicans who approve of Trump less strongly say there is solid evidence of rising temperatures. (Pew, 2017, p. 59.) The answers provided by the interviewees show that opinion on climate change correlates with partisanship. All of the Democrats interviewed for this thesis, and Jim, who identifies as a Green voter, are very concerned about the impact of climate change. Marcia and Brian, who are both Republican and very supportive of Donald Trump, are critical of the legitimacy of climate change, while Tony, a Republican and an organic farmer, is convinced about climate change. Asked about her opinion on the issue of climate change Marcia says: "As long as you keep it in perspective, but I think its way blown out of proportion for a scare tactic and also for a moneymaker." A Yale University survey on politics and global warming concludes that 70 percent of registered voters in the United States think global warming is happening. However, there are significant differences on the perception of climate change between Democrats and Republicans. 95 percent of liberal Democrats and 87 percent of moderate/conservative Democrats believe global warming is happening. Among Republicans, 63 percent of liberal/moderate Republicans believe climate change is real, while it is down to 38 percent among conservative Republicans. (Leiserowitz, p. 4.) While both Bill and Dan are worried about global warming, Marcia is not. This knowledge shares resemblances with the study from Yale. In total, 61 percent of registered voters are worried about global warming, but the percentage of Democrats who are worried is considerably higher than the percentage of Republicans. 93 percent of liberal Democrats and 81 percent of moderate/conservative Democrats are worried about global warming. By comparison, 54 percent of liberal/moderate Republicans and 21 percent of conservative Republicans are worried about global warming. (Leiserowitz, p. 4.) Tony is one the

Republicans who is worried about climate change and global warming. He says that he is convinced that climate change is happening:

> I do think there's something to it, and I think it's something we need to address. I am a big proponent. I believe in wind and solar, but I also believe that natural gas still play a role. I believe in nuclear. That's something that's still big in certain parts of Europe too. But no, I think it's something that... I'm not like, typically my other colleagues, typically, maybe, they're denying it. I just think there there's something to it. There really is.

Brian, a Republican living in Loganville, has spent his whole life farming, and he knows from experience that some years are better than others. The crops can fail, it can rain too much or the crops can wither because of the drought, but he does not think it has anything to do with climate change:

> I think it's a joke. Yeah, I think it's a liberal point that they like to bring up every four years to rep up their base. I talk to people. My veterinarian told me one time, he said; if you look at climate change it's on a 300 year rotation. He says so. It goes up and it goes down, and it goes up and it goes down. Some of our hottest summers and that were back in the 30's and 20's and stuff like that. And some our coldest winters were back then too. Although last year we did have one night where it got to be 40 below here. Now is that global warming? Some people say ‘yeah, well that's global warming cause it got so cold’. I said ‘well, that don't make no sense.’ So, you can't win an argument with an extremist.

Tom believes in climate change and those who do not are denying evidence, he says. When he built his new house, he made it as energy neutral as possible, and he regards climate change as the most important issue facing people – not only in Sauk County – but in the world. “It's a major problem, and if we don't solve that one, it almost doesn't matter if we solve the other ones. The planet will survive, but the people may not.” Like Tom, Bill is worried about climate change and the effects it will have on future generations. He drives a hybrid car and has solar panels on the roof, and he had his house energy tested and renovated with more climate friendly insulation. “It's crucial. It's one of those things we... We have to change the way we think about it. It's that fundamental,” says Bill. Like Bill, Dave is also very concerned about climate change, and he has also invested in solar panels. “Climate change terrifies me. I think it's real, and I think we need to be working on it. I think, governmentally, we need to be putting renewables out all over the place and reimbursing renewables. I just invested almost $20,000 in solar energy to make myself self-sufficient on the farm.” Dan feels the same way. “I believe in global warming. I know we have to make a stand to make it better. Get rid of it. Save the world, because six degrees and it’s all over for human life and most of the other species,” Dan says. Sam is also worried about climate change, and a part of him feels good that he never had any children, as they would inherit the problem when they grow up. Jim has a filter on the faucet in the kitchen. “There's way too much sulfur in the water,” he says. The environment and climate change are something that Jim is deeply concerned about – especially on behalf of his ten year old daughter. That is why he thinks it is crucial that Bernie Sanders becomes the next president:

> It's really simple: if Bernie Sanders doesn't win, human extinction is going to happen. Okay, the 99 percent will go away, and the one percent, because they have the resources, and the money and the power, they will survive in some form, but the rest of humanity will no

> longer exist. It will take several hundred years, but my daughter will know the greatest horrors humanity has seen up to this point.

The issue of climate change emphasizes the differing political priorities among the interviewees. Asked about what issues concerned them the most, there were distinct differences between Democratic and Republican voters. The Democratic interviewees mentioned clean government, winning the presidential election in November, environmental protection, the state of democracy, polarization, minimum wages, health care, education, and climate change. The Republican interviewees were concerned about the economy, the trade deal with China, road improvement and infrastructure, border security, prescription drugs and health care, maintaining Christian values, and smaller government on a federal level. These findings correlate with the survey on politics and global warming from Yale University survey. The Yale survey finds that global warming will be a very important issue for most Democrats in the 2020 presidential election. From a list of 29 issues, global warming ranks third among liberal democrats and eighth among moderate/conservative Democrats. In stark contrast, global warming ranks 23rd among liberal/moderate Republicans and 29th – last – among conservative Republicans. Among all registered voters global warming ranks 17th. (Leiserowitz, p. 26.) The five most important issues among liberal Democrats, according to the survey, are health care, environmental protection, global warming, income gap, and education. This is identical with the issues which were raised by the Democratic interviewees in Sauk County – including Jim, who, though he identifies as Green, votes for Bernie Sanders at presidential elections. The issues most important to moderate/conservative Democrats are health care, the economy, education, social security, and environmental protection. The priorities in voting issues highlights the differences between Democratic and Republican voters. The most important issues to moderate/liberal Republicans are the economy, health care, social security, terrorism, and border

security. Among conservative Republicans the five most important issues are border security, the economy, immigration reform, terrorism, and abortion. (Leiserowitz, p. 26.)

Views on universal health care

Why do heartland and southern states that are relatively poorer than coastal states, vote for Republican or neoliberal politicians who work against their material interests? For several years political scientists have tried to answer this paradox. Author Sarah Smarsh, who grew up in a poor, white family in rural Kansas, writes in her book *Heartland*, that it is because these voters are fearful of being deemed as lazy or poor:

> The Democrats are for poor people, and the Republicans are for the rich," she would declare and slam her beer on the table. "No," Mom would reply. "Democrats help people, and Republicans help people help themselves." People on welfare were presumed "lazy" and for us there was no more hurtful word. Within that framework, financially comfortable liberals may rest assured that their fortunes result from personal merit while generously insisting they be taxed to help the "needy." Impoverished people, then, must do one of two things: concede personal failure and vote for the party more inclined to assist them, or vote for the other party, whose rhetoric conveys hope that the labor of their lives is what will compensate them. (Smarsh, p. 272.)

Smarsh's experiences with growing up poor in rural Kansas have many similarities with what Cramer discovered among the rural population in Wisconsin. According to Cramer, rural residents emphasized the value of hard work as something especially necessary in rural places. "Ideas about who works hard are important for the way people talk about public policy because they are closely

tied to notions of who deserves taxpayer support. People we perceive as not working hard – as lazy – are undeserving. We tend to perceive hard workers, in contrast, as deserving of our respect and our support." (Cramer, p. 72.) In relation to who is working hard and who is lazy, a 2019 survey from Pew Research Center found that Republicans (46%) are more likely to describe Democrats as lazy than Democrats (20%) are to characterize Republicans in this way. (Pew, 2019, p. 18.) Cramer found that many of the Republicans that she interviewed, no matter the type of place they lived in, linked ideas of hard work with opposition to social welfare programs. "Rural Republicans, in contrast, would talk about the value of hard work by referring to rural life in general. They would claim that the demands of rural life simply required hard work." (Cramer, p. 73.) Cramer also found that Democrats valued hard work, but that they acknowledged that people need help sometimes. These findings correlate with the theory of rural consciousness which is a belief that rural areas are ignored by decision makers, that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and that rural folks have distinct values and lifestyles that are disrespected by people living in the cities. (Cramer, p. 12.) Among the ten respondents for this thesis, the four Republicans were opposed to the idea of universal health care while the majority of Democrats were in favor of it – and both Jim and Bill considered it to be a human right. For Bill, universal health care is intertwined with American values of equality:

> I think Bernie is right. It's an absolute human right. All men are created equal etc. If you want life, you need health care. If you don't wanna be chained to your bed because you have a sickness, you need health care. And if you want liberty and be able to act in society, you can't be quarantined or disabled because of an illness or an accident. So, it fits in with American values.

Sam likes the idea of universal health care and he thinks it should be available for all Americans:

> I like that idea and it goes to the heart that we spent too much money on it, and the money we spent is not for care - it's for profit. As long as it's a 'for profit' system, it's gonna be expensive for us. I think our country struggles with that concept because we view a 'not for profit' system as somehow evil. Like its socialism. You hear that thrown around a lot.

Dave struggled with obesity in his youth, and so he understands the struggle of many Americans who are obese and as a result of that suffer from poor health. But he is still torn on the idea of universal health care, and instead he would like to see that people take more responsibility for their own health. "I struggle with it. I love the idea, but one of my problems with health care in general - and with health insurance and with the way we run health right now - is that we hold doctors accountable - to a certain extent - for outcomes. We don't hold the patients responsible." While the Democratic interviewees favor universal health care, the Republican interviews are opposed to the idea. "Obviously I'm not for it, cause I feel as though the government screws up a lot of stuff, and I would rather it didn't participate in that part of my life," Marcia says. She is not the only American who has this view of the government. 56 percent of Americans say that the government "is almost always wasteful and inefficient." Among Republicans, 69 percent hold these views while 45 percent of Democrats hold these views. (Pew, 2017, p. 18.) Brian's opinion on universal health care resembles that of Marcia. The physicality of a life in farming has begun to wear on Brian who limps a little, and he has realized he cannot do as much work as he used to do. Asked about health care, Brian think it is best to let the private sector handle it instead of the government:

> I don't know a whole lot about universal health care. All I know is that I have health coverage. Yeah, it would be nice. I don't know if the government should pay for everybody's health care or what. But anytime the government runs something, it seems to run for more money than... it cost more than what... They don't run things efficiently. I'd leave it up to the private sector.

Tony, who is also a Republican, does not favor the idea of universal health care. As a veteran he can go to the Veterans Health Administration for health care. However, the system experienced long waiting periods for veterans to receive the care they needed. In order to fix it, veterans were allowed to go to private providers to reduce the backlog:

> So there was a huge backlog of veterans being seen. By allowing them to go outside, that backlog has shrunk. So veterans are being seen now by private providers. What concerns me with a universal health care system is that we're going to have something very similar to what happened in the Veterans Administration system, where people were waiting. I mean, we had people waiting for up to a year or so and that doesn't help.

As the analysis has shown, the four Republicans were opposed to the idea of universal health care while the majority of Democrats were in favor of it. The interviewees view on universal health care can therefore be seen as a continuation of the same differences that dominate on the issues of guns: that gun rights supporters (primarily Republican) are more individualistic, self-sufficient and independent, while non-gun owners (primarily Democrats) are more egalitarian and community minded. (Joslyn, p. 383.) This is also further underpinned by the survey from Pew Research Center which found that Republicans are more likely to view Democrats as being lazy than the other way

around. This again, shows the competing views between the individualistic Republicans and the egalitarian Democrats.

Views on President Trump and political opponents

The most distinct evidence of polarization among the interviewees was their opinion on President Trump. The Democratic interviewees felt contempt towards the president, while the Republican interviewees were very satisfied with Trump's achievements as president. A Gallup survey on the president's approval rating – measured February 17th - 28th 2020 – found that 47 percent approved of the president while 51 percent disapproved of him. Between March 2nd and March 13th, 44 percent approved and 52 percent disapproved. During his time in office, President Trump has averaged an approval rating of 40 percent – peaking at 49 percent and lowest at 35 percent. The average approval rating for United States presidents from 1938 to 2020 has been 53 percent. (Gallup, 2020.) In fact, Trump's approval ratings for his first year as president are the most polarized of any president dating back to Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953. In February, April and June, during Trump's first year as president, 88 percent of Republicans approved of his performance as president. In stark contrast, only eight percent of Democrats approved. Trump has the lowest approval marks from the opposing party of any president in the past six decades – indicating an increase in partisan polarization among Republicans and Democrats. In Obama's first year as president the approval rating among Democrats was 85 percent and 23 percent among Republicans. In terms of the image of the Republican Party, 45 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners, say that Trump has not changed the party much, while 40 percent say he has changed it for the better. Only 12 percent of Republicans say the president has changed the party for the worse. This is in stark contrast to how Democrats view Trump's influence on the Grand Old Party. Overall, 63 percent of Democrats and Democratic leaners say Trump has changed the

Republican Party for the worse. (Pew, 2017, p. 71.) These statistics correlate with the opinions of the interviewees in Sauk County, where Marcia is very satisfied with Trump's achievements as president. "When he says the people of America comes first, I believe him, and I think what he has done and what he is trying to do, kinda reflects that," she says. Marcia hopes that Trump will get a second term as president. "I think we're on a roll and all the obstacles that have been put in front of him, and yet he's still accomplished what he has." Marcia sees the country as a business and the presidency as an investment, and she is willing to invest four more years in Trump, she says:

> I've always wanted a president to be a businessman, because I think this country is run like a business. And I've wanted to give a businessman the chance. You know, it's four years. I would invest four years to see what that person can do for this country. After four years, if I didn't think maybe the businessman was capable, then I can vote differently. But yeah, I'll invest four years, and I think we've done pretty good with him.

Brian officially became a member of the Republican Party in February 2020 – "to throw a little bit more support behind Trump," he says. Brian likes Trump's approach and he thinks he is the best president for the farmers in Wisconsin:

> He's a little harsh and a little brash. Stuff like that. Sometimes you need that. Get in your face. I say what I mean, and I mean what I say. He's proven it. He's turned certain amounts of the economy around. Stock market is doing relatively well. Unemployment across the United States is doing remarkably well. Border security is important.

In Brian's opinion the Democrats are leading a witch-hunt on Donald Trump because they cannot bear to see him succeed:

> The way the Democrats fought against Trump. They'd rather see the American farmer lose than to have Trump win. And when he comes round and turns that around, and that deal (with China, ed.) is finalized and everything starts happening and they start spending money again, it's for the better of the whole of the United States - not just one economic class and not just the super wealthy. It's the auto industry, the computer industry, the farming industry.

Jeremy has his preservations about president Trump, but overall, he likes that the president has followed through on his promises from his election campaign. "I think he is boorish and crass for the most part. He is definitely not someone that you look to and aspire to be like as a human being, I think. But when it comes to what has been accomplished, I think he is moving in the right direction, I just wish someone would take his Twitter away," says Jeremy who, like many young voters, didn't vote at the 2016 presidential election. The turnout among voters aged between 18 and 29 was 50 percent. 55 percent of the young voters voted for Hilary Clinton, while 37 percent voted for Donald Trump. (Brookings, 2016.) But in November 2020 Jeremy will be voting for Trump most likely:

> At the time I felt that neither candidate had met my minimum requirement for someone I felt like casting a vote for. I felt that way at the time, but now I do feel differently. I feel Trump has demonstrated, at least in terms of policy, to be governing in a way that I don't have any major qualms with. On a policy level. So I will likely be voting for him. I can't think of any of the remaining candidates from the Democratic Party right now that represents any of the

> values that I see as most important, so my choices are either to vote for Trump or not vote at all, but right now I would be voting for Trump.

Tony's opinion on President Trump is similar to Jeremy's. He feels that Trump is getting things done, but he does not particularly like the way he get things done. "Obviously he is not perfect. He is like a lot of people. Do I wish he wouldn't say some of the things he says? Yeah. I'm not gonna lie about that. But I think he is a man of integrity." Tony has met the president and he came across as a very genuine person in Tony's estimation:

> Why I support him as much as I do, is because he actually does what he says he is going to do. And I think, either you may not like him or you like him, you have to understand that when he says something, he actually is doing that. To me that is kind of a breath of fresh air, because a lot of people say a lot of things. Talk is cheap, I'm sure you've heard that before. But he is actually following through on a lot of things that he said he's going to do.

Donald Trump's election as president in 2016 was carried by white-working-class voters – a class of voters which since the 1970's have been moving towards the Republican Party. Though the numbers of white-working-class voters have been going down for decades, it still makes up a substantial part of the American electorate. This was key for Trump's win against Hilary Clinton - especially in swing states like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. (Abramowitz, p. 141.)

> Donald Trump's 2016 campaign included frequent appeals to white voters who were upset about economic trends such as stagnant wages and the loss of manufacturing jobs. What was most striking about Trump's campaign, however, was its explicit appeals to white

> resentment of the increasing visibility and influence of racial and ethnic minorities. (Abramowitz, p. 143.)

While the Republican interviewees for this thesis are very positive towards President Trump, the Democratic counterpart has a radically different opinion on the president. During the interview, Dan called Trump a "wannabe dictator" and a "total jerk":

> The jerk we have in there now can't even read. I doubt he ever read the constitution. He's ignorant. He has no education, knows nothing about history, knows nothing about science, he knows nothing about nothing except popularism and how to be a TV-star. And how to divide people. Just like Walker. (…) He is a wannabe dictator. He likes Putin. He likes Kim Jong Un. He likes the president of Brazil. All these dictators around the world, he likes them. He likes the guy in the Philippines, he likes all these guys. A lot are dictators for life and that's what he wants to be. He wants to get rid of the constitution of the United States.

Dan is genuinely worried about the future of the United States and democracy. This pessimistic outlook is shared by Bill. "I'm just afraid that we're gonna end up as a, you know, basically a fascist dictatorship if Trump gets reelected. I don't tell people that, but that's there, because I see what he is doing and I see how that worked in Germany in the 30's," says Bill. Tom is also very critical towards Trump's presidency. "He's one of the most egomaniac selfish persons that have ever been on the world, I think. It's obvious he only cares about himself. To some degree to his children. To some degree to his wife. But he primarily cares about himself," says Tom. Jim, who identifies as Green, goes even further by suggesting that Trump should be in jail. "He's horrific. He needs to be in jail. His whole family needs to be in jail. Hilary Clinton and her family needs to be in jail. They

all need to be in jail. He is corrupt. He is obviously using the presidency as an extension of his company. He should be in jail for a very long time." For Sam the president is an embarrassment, and thus it is very important for Sam that the Democratic Party finds a candidate who can win against Trump at the presidential election in November in 2020:

> He's a disappointment and an embarrassment to me. I also view him as a reflection of what our politics have become, and he was the natural outcome of that. What I mean by that, is that politicians on both sides have increasingly skilled themselves to be able to do a lot of talking without saying anything. As a means to try to appease to as many groups as they can, and offend as many groups as they can, without really speaking their mind. That disappoints me. I think a lot of Americans are disappointed by that. We want someone to be direct and honest with us - even if they disagree with us. Politicians do that less and less because there is more and more interest groups that like to tear you down, when you say something inappropriate or that they feel is wrong. To me that's kinda what has destroyed our politics in this country. So I've become more and more open and looking for someone who will be honest and speak their mind - even if they're telling me something I don't really wanna hear.

A 2018 survey from Pew Research Center found that Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say that the American democracy is working at least somewhat well, and less likely to say the governmental system needs changes. Far more Republicans than Democrats also say that the political system is the "best in the world" or "above average" when compared with political systems of other developed nations. (Pew, 2018, p. 11.) This finding from Pew correlates with the normative Americans as described by Hartman previously in relation to culture wars. According to Hartman, normative Americans were more likely to believe that the United States was the best nation in the

world. (Hartmann, 2015, p. 5.) Historically Democrats, more than Republicans, have preferred politicians who were able to make political compromises, but that has changed. Today, 46 percent of Democrats and 44 percent of Republicans say "they like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with." That is a major shift from July 2017, where Democrats were 23 percentage points more likely than Republicans to have positive views of elected officials who compromise. (Pew, 2018, p. 91.) The survey also found that many Americans have doubts about President Trump's level of respect for the country's democratic institutions and traditions. This resembles the partisan divide in opinion on Trump among the interviewees. According to the Pew survey, Republicans are positive in this regard while Democrats are very negative. Overall, 54 percent say that Trump has not too much respect for the U.S. institutions and traditions. Contrary to this 77 percent of conservative of Republicans and Republican leaning voters say Trump has at least a fair amount of respect – among Democrats and Democratic leaning voters only 16 percent think Trump has at least a fair amount respect for democratic institutions and traditions. Pew, 2018, p. 45.)

The highly polarizing views among Republicans and Democrats on President Trump, which are consistent with the interviewees from Sauk County, are also visible in the way that Democrats and Republicans view each other. This to such a degree that the majority of Republicans and Democrats now dislike the opposing party and its leaders more than they like their own party and its leaders:

> Dislike of the other side is so strong, in fact, that even when partisans have reservations about their own party's candidate, they are very reluctant to cross party lines. The result, as we have seen, is that recent elections have been characterized by record levels of party loyalty and straight ticket voting. (Abramowitz, p. 147.)

This phenomenon is called *affective polarization*. This is defined as the "tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively and copartisans positively." (Iyengar, p. 691.) The affective polarization has to do with ingroups and outgroups:

> The standard definition of an outgroup is a group to which a person does not belong, whereas an ingroup is a group to which a person does belong. Research in psychology generally shows that members of an ingroup frequently ascribe undesirable or inappropriate traits to members of outgroups. (Iyengar, 691.)

But the polarization is not only on political issues – it runs deeper than that. In 2009, only nine percent of married couples in the United States consisted of Democrat-Republican pairs. In fact, research suggests that partisanship exceeds physical or personal attributes in choosing a partner. (Iyengar, p. 692.) This is a tendency that has evolved over more than 50 years. In 1960, five percent of American adults answered "yes" to whether or not it would "disturb" them if their child married a member of the other political party. In 2010, 33 percent of Democrats and 40 percent of Republicans answered "yes". A survey from 2018 even found that Thanksgiving dinners attended by residents from opposing-party precincts were 30 to 50 minutes shorter than same-party dinners. (Chen, p. 1020.) Americans used to move to a new area in search of a better job, cheaper housing, or milder weather. But today, Americans move in order to live surrounded by people who share their political views. Shanto Iyengar, a professor of political science at Stanford University, writes that "among Americans who say they identify with a political party, negative views of the out party and its supporters have risen sharply since the 1980's." (Iyengar, 691.) This is backed by a 2019 survey from Pew Research Center. The survey found that partisan division and animosity among

Democrats and Republicans have only deepened since 2016. A majority, 63 percent, of Republicans now say that Democrats are “more unpatriotic” than other Americans. 55 percent of Republicans say Democrats are “more immoral” when compared with other Americans - 47 percent of Democrats say the same about Republicans. (Pew, 2019, p. 5.) While the survey finds that Republicans in general are more likely to ascribe negative characteristics to Democrats, 75 percent of Democrats say Republicans are “more close-minded” than other Americans. Like Hochschild suggests, the survey finds that the polarization among Democrats and Republicans goes beyond politics. The majority in both parties say that they do not share values and goals with the opposing party. (Pew, 2019, p. 6.) This high level of polarization among Democrats and Republicans entails a risk that partisans are more willing to accept restrictions to their own freedoms in order to gain the upper hand against their political opponents, argues Abramowitz:

> Rising mistrust and, at times, hatred of the opposing party and its leaders may be one of the most dangerous consequences of growing partisan polarization. (…) When supporters of each party come to see both leaders and supporters of the other party not just as political rivals but as evildoers out to harm the nation, they are more likely to be willing to accept illiberal measures such as restrictions on freedom of expression or even the use of force against political opponents. (Abramowitz, p. 151.)

An example of the division between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County is Brian, who has been on the Sauk County Board since 2012. Though the board is supposed to be non-partisan that is not the case in Sauk. Prior to the election on April 7th 2020, liberals held 16 seats and conservatives 15. Brian is among the conservatives on the board, and he can feel the polarization between Democrats and Republicans. “I don't care for them. I don't care for any of them. There's a couple of

them who are nice people. A couple. There might be five of them out the 16 liberals on the board, that I would consider okay to nice people. The rest of them, they're kinda nasty people," he says. Brian finds it difficult to interact with people that he knows he is politically opposed to. "I don't like to talk to them. I will, if I have to. I don't associate with them. My iPad over there's got every phone number in it from the county board members. I don't enter somebody's phone number into my cellphone, unless I know I'm gonna have to deal with them on a weekly or monthly basis." In Brian's opinion, rural areas like Loganville, where he lives, tend to be more conservative than urban areas like Baraboo, and he tries to go to Baraboo as rarely as possible – two or three times a month for county board meetings. In Loganville he can buy a few items in the convenience store, and grocery shopping is done in Reedsburg ten miles away:

> We're a rural community. They are more like an urban area. They have urban ideas and urban, political views. Spring Green is the same way. We're more conservative out here, and they're more liberal in the cities. And I don't know why that is. I don't know if it comes down to the values you grew up with or what. I was born and raised. My dad, he's a real liberal. I got two brothers and one sister, and we're all conservatives, so I don't know. He either failed or he taught us in a way that he didn't wanna teach us.

Tom is also on the Sauk County Board. He has been there for 18 years, but he is one of the liberals. In Tom's opinion, the Republican Party used to be decent, but that has changed now:

> Again, I'm old enough to remember when I think the Republican Party actually had some respectability. They have no respectability at this point. They've just allowed Trump to take over the party. Most national Republican figures now are just people trying not to have

> Trump get mad at them. They are not really representing people. They are trying to hang on to their prestigious position.

Like Tom, Dan used to have a lot of respect for the Republican Party. Though Dan today is active in the Democratic Party of Sauk County where he volunteers on campaigns, he used to lean Republican:

> My dad was a Republican. He was a military man. When I was a kid, I leaned Republican. I voted for Barry Goldwater, voted for Nixon, voted for all those jerky Republicans. But anyway, I did. And I even worked on campaigns for Republicans like in assembly and state and that.

Dan explains that he could not recognize the Republican Party any longer and therefore he switched alliance. “As a morale person I can't go along with that racism and hate. And basically racism and hate has taken over the Republican Party. This is not the Republican Party of Ronald Reagan, although I didn't like Reagan. I didn't vote for him.” Dan has been leaning Democratic since Ronald Reagan’s time as president from 1981 to 1989, but it was the election of Scott Walker as governor of Wisconsin in November 2010, and the subsequent enactment of Act 10, which really changed things politically for Dan. “I'd say where it really became bad was when they did the divide and conquer and started effecting my paycheck. You know, I had worked a long time to get that extra 6,500 dollars a year, and then he just sucked it up just like that. Scott Walker is a total jerk in my estimation.” Dan is referring to the Wisconsin Budget Repair Bill (Act 10). Walker took office on January 3rd 2011. On February 11th he introduced a budget repair bill called Act 10. The bill “called for an end to collective bargaining rights, except with respect to wages, for all public

employees. It also required all public employees to increase their payroll contributions for health and pension benefits (to the tune of a 10 percent cut to many of their paychecks).” (Cramer, p. 1.) The enactment of Act 10 was very controversial in a state that had been the first to start collective bargaining for government employees in 1959. (Cramer, p. 186.) From Dan’s experience Wisconsin has become more polarized following Scott Walker’s tenure as governor and Trump’s election as president. Today he views the Republican Party as a cult – underlining the political divisions between Democrats and Republicans:

> They got so consumed in a charismatic, dictatorial, leader, that they all went over the hill. How did Germany go over the hill? How did they all get hooked up with Hitler and get into the killing of six million Jews and all that kinda stuff? They all got sucked into the cult. How can people go to those stupid ass Trump meetings and listen to that guy lie, lie, lie 18-19.000 times? They just swallow it and believe it. So, I just think they are basically nuts. But most times people are nuts, you really can't pull them back from it.

Jim, who identifies as Green, thinks similar of Republican voters. “Conservatism is an experiential, intellectual, and socially transmitted disease. They are victims of a broken system which was made to create them that way to control them,” says Jim who, because he is introvert, does not socialize much with other people. Instead he uses social media for interactions, but mostly with people who are likeminded and not with those who he disagrees with. “On Facebook I do, but I typically weed out most of them because I just get rage filled, and then I just doesn't go well. So, I don't really, no.” Sam, like Dan, was a split voter for many years. At elections he would vote for candidates from both parties on his ballot. This changed for him in 2004 when the United States invaded Iraq. Since then he has always voted for a Democratic candidate in any election and during President Obama’s

second term he became a member of the Democratic Party. Today Sam does not trust the Republican Party:

> I've changed. I'm at the point now where I can't vote for a Republican for president. I don't think I can vote for a Republican at a local level either. Even though I used to do that, I don't think I can do that anymore. I don't have enough faith in what they are doing and what they are trying to achieve to do that. So I'll vote for the Democratic candidate.

In Sam's opinion the Republican Party has become immoral and unjust:

> I don't think that they have the interest of all the people in mind. I think they exclude mostly poor people. They think poor people are immoral and that they are poor because of their own doing. They don't care if they have health care or if their kids get a good education and so forth. I just find that immoral and counter-productive to us as society.

Sam is touching on some of the most pronounced partisan differences – the views of equal opportunity in the United States. According to the 2018 survey from Pew Research Center, Republicans are twice as likely as Democrats to say "everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed". Furthermore, 60 percent of Republicans say that the rights and freedoms of all people are respected in the United States. Only 38 percent of Democrats say this. (Pew, 2018, p. 9.)

By analyzing the interviews from Sauk County, it is evident that the polarization between Democrats and Republicans – both in Sauk County as well as nationally - has increased during Trump's presidency. Furthermore, the interviews highlight that the Democrats and Republicans in

Sauk County view each other in an increasingly negative way – a development that is underpinned by the survey from Pew Research Center.

Media habits

The interviewees were asked about their media habits in an attempt to gain knowledge about how they consumed news, and subsequently how they made sense of the world. Overall, those who identified with the Democratic Party preferred to watch the news on CNN, ABC and MSNBC. With regards to newspapers and online sources they read newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. Those of the interviewees who identified with the Republican Party tended to watch *Fox News* and read fewer or no newspapers at all. In general, all of the interviewees had an interest in local Wisconsin news – mostly on TV – though some also kept the *Baraboo News Republic* or other local newspapers. As it will be accounted for in the following, these findings from Sauk County are very representative of the general media habits among Democrats and Republicans in the United States as Democrats tend to use a wider range of news sources, while Republicans tend to mostly use Fox News. Bill, a Democrat, reads the *Baraboo News Republic*, *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*. He tries to read two or three articles a day to stay up to date on what is happening around the world. On TV Bill has his preferences as well.

> I'm an MSNBC pretty much, although sometimes I think CNN is better. But I always try and catch PBS NewsHour and I've done that since it was the MacNeil era NewsHour. Because I think they're a little less... they don't have as much a point of view. And then we catch the local news at 10 o'clock to see what the weather and what the local things are.

Tom gets most of his news online since he does not own a TV and does not listen to the radio that much. He does not have good reception where he lives, he says. Online he prefers to read *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and whatever might pop up when searching online. Sometimes he also checks out university departments if he wants to know more about a specific topic. As a representative, Dave tries to read and listen to a variety of things to stay up to date with what is happening. He gets the *Wisconsin State Journal* in his office, and he listens to talk radio from both sides of the political spectrum. "I do that, cause I wanna understand where everybody gets their things. I struggle to watch Fox News, but I do. I make myself do it. And I would say I watch all three: ABC, CBS, NBC." Contrary, Tony, a Republican state representative, says he does not read a lot of newspapers except the local newspaper for Juneau County. "You know what. I don't read a lot of newspapers. I hate to say it. I mean, I read my newspapers up in the office which is like the Juneau County one. I read the Reedsburg papers and things like that. So, but I don't read the journals or anything like that." On TV, Tony tries to watch a variety of things to stay informed. "Believe it or not. I watch a lot of different things. I watch CBS. I watch Fox of course. I'll watch a little bit CNN, but I usually watch ABC. So my morning news, typically I watch CBS, a station out of Madison." Marcia does not read any newspapers and on TV she prefers to watch Fox News for her daily dose of news:

> Right now where I live I do not have cable, so we have an antenna. Cable is a stinker as far as my social area, and I think for a lot of people the prize of cable is, you know, nasty. So a lot of us has gotten off of cable, so we're on an antenna, so we get about 16 channels, and the news is local for Wisconsin and then the national news. I tend not to listen to any of it. I guess minus Fox News.

Brian, who lives in an area similar to Marcia, uses his smartphone for news. “Google pops up news stories and I just randomly look at it. If it's interesting I hit on it.” This means the news that reaches Brian are dependent on Googles algorithms and not solely on news values. On TV, Brian watches Fox News as well as the local Wisconsin news. “I don't have a specific site that I go to. Like this morning I was watching some of the morning talk shows on Fox, and they said Elizabeth Warren was dropping out of the presidential race. So I got it from there. And then I sent out a couple of group texts: “She's done.” Sam is on the political left. He does not subscribe to any newspapers in print, but he reads the *New York Times*, CNN, and BBC online. On the TV he watches WISC, a CBS-affiliated television station in Madison, as well as CNN and BBC. Jim, who identifies as Green, describes himself as an idealist. He is skeptical of the mainstream media. They are part of the problem, he says, and thus he gets his news from independent media:

> I do a lot of it from Facebook. But actual news, I use independent media. The Young Turks, The David Pakman Show, The Rise which is fairly big on progressive stuff. 2016 was a big awakening for me about the corporate media as well. Especially Rachel Maddow. She was hailed as a progressive newsperson, but she most truly showed her bias during that time. We actually cut the core. We haven't actually had any cable for several years now.

Jim explains that he uses independent media, because he doesn’t trust the mainstream media. “Whenever you have an established media, you have to look for the bias, because they are going to have one. You have to figure what it is and what this author's piece is.” In Jim’s opinion, the large medias are part of what he describes as America’s problem. “All the media in the entire country is owned by six different companies which is owned by corporations which is owned by the one percent.”

The distinctly different media habits among the Democrats and Republicans interviewed for this thesis correlates with a recent survey from Pew Research Center from January 2020. The survey on media polarization finds that "Republicans and Democrats place their trust in two nearly inverse news media environments." (Pew, 2020, p. 4.) Overall, Democrats tended to use more sources and trust them more, while Republicans tended to perceive news sources as untrustworthy. The survey also finds that partisan polarization in the use and trust of media sources has widened over the last five years. "A comparison to a similar study by the Center of web-using U.S. adults in 2014 finds that Republicans have grown increasingly alienated from most of the more established sources, while Democrats' confidence in them remains stable, and in some cases, has strengthened." (Pew, 2020, p. 4.) The survey asked the interviewees whether or not they trusted 30 different news medias. Among those who identified as Democratic or leaned Democratic, 13 news sources were trusted by more than 33 percent. The most trusted news sources were CNN (67%), NBC (61%), ABC (60%), CBS (59%), PBS (56%), and *The New York Times* (53%). BBC, MSNBC, *The Washington Post*, NPR, *Time Magazine*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* were also trusted by more than 33 percent of Democrats/Democratic leaning. Among Republicans and Republican leaning, the image is turned on its head. Only two news sources were trusted by more than 33 percent of the interviewees – Fox News (65%), and ABC (33%). (Pew, 2020, p. 10.) ABC is followed closely by CBS, NBC and The Sean Hannity Show which were all trusted by 30 percent of Republicans or Republican leaning. The distrust among Republicans towards mainstream media is highly visible when looking at the perception of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. These two well-known newspapers were only trusted by 15 and 13 percent respectively among Republicans, while 53 and 47 percent of Democrats trusted them. These statistics show that CNN (67%) is as trusted among Democrats as Fox News (65%) is among Republicans. The divisions in media habits between Democrats and Republicans are also visible when they are asked what news

sources they distrust. 61 percent of Democrats distrust Fox News, while 58 percent of Republicans distrust CNN. (Pew, 2020, p. 12.) The differing levels of trust and distrust towards news sources among Republicans and Democrats tell a story of deep polarization, and it underlines the notion of two competing versions of America, a normative and a new, as it has previously been described. However, a few news sources stand out across parties. PBS, BBC and the *Wall Street Journal* are all trusted more than distrusted by both Republicans and Democrats. (Pew, 2020, p. 16.) The Pew Research Center survey also points out how Republicans are heavily reliant on Fox News for news about politics and the 2020 presidential election. On a weekly basis 60 percent of Republicans get this type of news from Fox News – while the second most used news source by some distance is ABC News (30%). Meanwhile Democrats use a much wider variety of news sources for news about politics. 53 percent use CNN followed by NBC, ABC, and CBS who are all used weekly by more than 30 percent of Democrats. (Pew, 2020, p. 17.) Pew Research Center conducted a similar survey on political polarization and media habits in 2014, and compared to the 2020 survey on the same subject, Pew Research Center finds that the partisan media divide has grown, largely driven by Republican distrust:

> Most of the movement over these five years has come from Republicans and Republican leaning independents increasing their distrust of many of the more traditional outlets tied to legacy platforms like network TV and print newspapers. There has been far less movement among Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, and those smaller changes are largely expressed as greater trust in a few outlets. (Pew, 2020, p. 26.)

Of 20 news sources that the interviewees were asked about both in 2014 and 2019, Republican distrust had increased for 15 of those. According to the research, the 15 news sources are among

those which have been criticized most often by President Trump. For CNN distrust among Republicans went from 33 percent in 2014, to 58 percent in 2019. Distrust in *The Washington Post* increased from 22 percent to 39 percent, and distrust in *The New York Times* increased from 29 percent to 42 percent in the past five years. The level of distrust among Democrats has remained stable in the same period, though trust in *The Washington Post* increased from 37 percent to 47 percent – directly contrary to the newspaper's standing among Republicans. (Pew, 2020, p. 26.) The increasing level of Republican trust towards the media correlates with the Pew Research Center survey *Trusting the News Media in the Trump Era* from 2019 on trust in the news media during Trumps first period as president. During his presidency Trump has time and time again criticized the media as well as journalists for their ethical standards. These comments resonate with those who approve of Trump's performance as president. Among Republicans 31 percent say that journalists have very low ethical standards, while only five percent of Democrats hold this view. (Pew, 2019 (2), p. 3.) The survey also finds that partisans who are highly politically aware are even more polarized in their views of journalists. 91 percent of highly engaged Democrats have a great deal or fair amount of confidence that journalists will act in the best interests of the public – only 16 percent of highly engaged Republicans say the same. (Pew, 2019 (2), p. 4.) The survey also finds that Americans who express a greater level of trust in others tend to hold the media in higher esteem than those who are less trusting towards others.

As described above, Republicans tend to rely heavily on Fox News for their weekly news about politics and elections. Republicans also have a high level of trust in Fox News, and there is good reasoning to back these findings. In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, Hochschild writes about a woman who explains that "Fox is like family to me." (Hochschild, p. 126.) Hochschild describes how Fox News infuses news with fear which is then installed in the viewer. "Fox offers news and opinions on matters of politics, of course, but it often strikes a note of alarm on issues – diseases,

stock market plunges – with little direct bearing on politics. All news programs address our emotional alarm systems, of course." (Hochschild, p. 127.) The fear, according to Hochschild, is designed to target a specific audience. "Fox News stokes fear. And the fear seems to reflect that of the audience it most serves – white middle- and working-class people. During the series of police killings of young black men, Fox reporters tended to defend white police officers and criticize black rioters. It defended the right to own guns and restrict voter registration." (Hochschild, p. 127.) In his book *Fox Populism – Branding Conservatism as Working Class*, Reece Peck, an assistant professor of Media Culture at College of Staten Island, argues that Fox News has transformed media and politics in the United States by branding itself as working class. "In 2000, Bill O'Reilly famously said his program was the only television show that presents news 'from a working-class point of view.'" (Peck, p. x.) According to Peck, this branding of being for the working class has been successfully going on since. "Not only does Fox' populist journalistic style make for clever marketing and dramatic entertainment, it also stands as one of the most sophisticated and culturally astute forms of political communication in recent American history." (Peck, p. x.) The quote underlines how Fox News has positioned itself as the voice of working class America through a deliberate and well-executed branding strategy, which helps explain why people living in rural areas tend to vote for the Republican Party.

Rural-urban voting behavior

Generally speaking there is broad agreement in the United States that Democrats tend to live in cities and urbanized spaces, while Republicans tend to live in more rural areas. In relation to Sauk County the eastern part of the county, which borders on Dane County and the capitol of Madison, tends to vote Democratic at elections, while the western part of the county, which is also significantly more rural, tends to vote Republican at elections. In his book *Why Cities Lose,*

political scientist Jonathan A. Rodden writes that the urbanization of the Democratic party has been a process lasting most of the 20th century:

> In 1916 Woodrow Wilson's support was no higher in urban counties than in rural counties. after the New Deal and World War II, (…) John F. Kennedy's vote share in 1960 was strongly correlated with population density. He lost in most rural counties and won solid majorities in most urban counties. (…) By 2016 the urban concentration of Hilary Rodham Clinton's support was astounding. She lost by large margins in rural counties and won overwhelming in urban counties. (Rodden, p. 4.)

This development was highly visible at the 2016 presidential election when Donald J. Trump won in Wisconsin. Madison and Milwaukee stayed blue, while 60 out of 72 counties in Wisconsin voted Republican. (New York Times, 2017.) In *The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior*, James G. Gimpel et al. argue that the divide between rural and urban dwellers began with the rise of the American city and the decline of agriculture. People became more class conscious. "With the rise of the city came the rise of manufacturing and the decline of agriculture. Accordingly, an activation and awareness of class consciousness became a political force. Differences between manufacturing and agriculture divided citizens more than the different types of crops they may have harvested." (Gimpel, et al, p. 4.) As the industrialization grew, Americans moved away from the farms to find work at the factories in the fast-growing cities, where they joined immigrants coming from Europe. This movement from rural America to the emerging urban America is visible in the number of Americans living in the cities. In 1790, five percent of the population lived in urban settings. In 1860, 20 percent did. (Waterhouse, p. 49.) These differences are linked to the dispute between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton in the days of the Founding Fathers in the

1790's. The dispute is also known as Jeffersonians versus Hamiltonians, and ultimately it is a dispute that is very much still present today in the United States – rural America versus urban America. The Federalist Alexander Hamilton represented the mercantile interests in the American cities, while Thomas Jefferson represented the rural interests. Hamilton argued for a strong centralized government that would safeguard the interests of the businessman, while Jefferson advocated for a decentralized agrarian republic – a political and economic vision that has been labelled "agrarian democracy" by contemporary historians. "As early as the 1780s, Jefferson argued that self-sufficient farmers represented a bulwark against tyranny and warned that a society that moved away from agriculture and toward industry risked corruption." (Waterhouse, p. 61.) On the opposite site of Jefferson stood Hamilton who, from his position at the Treasury Department, spoke in favor of a strong central bank, and protective tariffs to bolster domestic manufacturing. This was in contrast to Jefferson, himself a landowner in Virginia, who emphasized the importance of the American farmer. "Jefferson believed that self-reliant and small-scale family farms, not impersonal factories, (or, ironically, large slave-labor plantations like his), provided a bulwark against tyranny and ensured the future of self-governance. In Jefferson's mind, the drudgery of manufacturing work and dependence on daily wages stripped away personal independence." (Waterhouse, p. 62.) With his conviction that America was dependent on the self-reliant farmer, Jefferson implied the notion of the American Dream that anyone can prosper in the United States if they are willing to work hard and are dedicated to achieving that dream. The divisions between Alexander Hamilton and The Federalist Party on one side, and Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic-Republican Party on the other side, lasted until the Civil War broke out in 1861 – though the fundamental disagreement between urban and rural America lasted much longer. "Variations on these themes have been central to American politics throughout the nation's history." (Waterhouse, p. 63.)

In present day America the divisions between what began with Hamilton and Jefferson are still present in a variety of ways. One example is how residential neighborhoods have become increasingly more homogenous, and geographic distance creates social distance. “As respondents live farther and farther from a city, they are more likely to identify as Republicans. Meanwhile, the more concentrated the population, the more likely an individual identifies as Democratic.” (Gimpel, et al, p. 17.) In *The Urban–Rural Gulf in American Political Behavior*, James G. Gimpel et al. concludes that Democrats live nearer to large cities than independents and Republicans. “The median distance from a city (of at least one hundred thousand) is 20 miles for a Republican, 17 miles for an independent, and 12 miles for a Democrat.” (Gimpel, et al, p. 11.) Democrats are also more likely to live in more densely populated areas than Republicans. In relation to the interviewees in Sauk County this is somewhat true as Tony, Marcia and Brian live in the western part of the county, the furthest away from Madison, while the Democrats, as well as Jeremy, a Republican, and Jim, a Green voter, lives in Baraboo, which is 20-30 minutes’ drive closer to Madison – a city with around 260,000 inhabitants. According to Gimpel et al., the level of education among Republicans increase, the less rural they live. Progressive ideas also thrive better in cities where there is a wider variety of races, religions and beliefs than in rural communities. In contrast, rural characteristics are described as self-reliance and traditionalism. “The attitudinal effects of anonymity and impersonality in the city include both the development of respect for people’s privacy and a tolerance for deviance and eccentricity. (…) Small settlements, on the other hand, are associated with direct contact with a more homogeneous group of people and positions.” (Gimpel, et al, p. 7.) This description correlates with how Brian described the differences between Loganville and Baraboo in the paragraph “views on political opponents.” “They are more like an urban area. They have urban ideas and urban, political views. Spring Green is the same way. We're more conservative out here,” Brian explained. The researchers also find that rural life may be associated

religiosity which can predispose people to favor conservatism. We learn from analyzing the interviews from Sauk County that religion is very influential on the interviewees' opinions on issues like abortion and homosexuality. Gimpel et al. conclude that there are two groups of lower income respondents in the surveys. One is Republican and live in the most remote, rural areas. The other group is Democratic and lives in dense central city neighborhoods. (Gimpel, et al., p. 16.) This correlates with the findings from the interviews in Sauk County, where Brian, who lives in a very rural area in Loganville, as well as Jim, who lives in central Baraboo, are both struggling financially. While those who go to church almost weekly tend to live in rural areas, the study concludes that the difference between urban and rural voters cannot be explained by religious devotion. (Gimpel, et al, p. 16.) Analyzing how the interviewees for this thesis describe their relationship with religion, it is also evident that both Democrats and Republicans describe themselves as very religious people. Thus, it would be inadequate to claim that religion alone determines their political orientation.

In *Political Polarization along the Rural-Urban Continuum? The Geography of the Presidential Vote, 2000 – 2016*, Scala and Johnson delineate a rural-urban continuum that differentiates U.S. counties based on size, location, and proximity. This definition of the rural-urban continuum is used to explain the voting patterns in the 2016 presidential election when Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States. Through the research Scala and Johnson identify an interface between the rural and urban America. To characterize the rural-urban continuum, the researchers subdivided the counties into eight categories that represent population concentration. The categories covered all areas – from the most densely settled large cities to the most remote rural periphery. The definitions varied from *large urban core* to *nonmetropolitan nonadjacent other*. (Scala & Johnson, p. 166.) By this definition Sauk County is a nonmetropolitan adjacent micropolitan county. The definition for this type of county is a county that has a town with a

population between 10,000 and 50,000. By 2010 there were 372 adjacent micropolitan counties with 18.4 million residents in the United States. (Scala & Johnson, p. 167.) In this regard the estimated population in Baraboo, the largest town in Sauk County, was 12,142 in 2018. The research found that Democrats' performed better in recreational counties than in farming counties. (Scala & Johnson, p. 180.) This is interesting in relation to Sauk County as it is dependent on both tourism and agriculture. It also found that evangelicals favored Republicans while Catholics favored Democrats. Furthermore, it suggests that urban dwellers were more likely to support stronger gun control, abortion and gay marriage than rural dwellers. (Scala & Johnson, p. 168.) Residents of urban cores were also more likely to believe in climate change and vote for politics that prioritized environmental protection over job creation. This matches the tendencies of polarization among Democrats and Republicans which have previously been described in this thesis. Scala and Johnson conclude that the urban-rural interface lies in the suburbs of smaller metropolitan cores and at the outer edge of larger metropolitan areas. (Scala & Johnson, p. 181.) "The interface or 'tipping point' between urban and rural occurs in the suburbs of small metropolitan areas. Residents who closely resemble rural Americans in their conservative ideology and Republican partisanship. (Scala & Johnson, p. 170.) This is interesting in relation to Sauk County since Dane County on the eastern side of Sauk County, where Madison is located, is categorized as *small metro core* with a population less than a million. Following this understanding Sauk County can be placed on *the tipping point* between urban and rural and therefore on the tipping point between Democratic home turf and Republican home turf. This can help explain why Sauk County is swinging back and forth in elections – from a Democratic majority to a Republican majority and vice versa.

Experiences with polarization

The interviews for this thesis were conducted before the coronavirus evolved into a national pandemic. However, the coronavirus and its subsequent handling in Wisconsin is worth paying attention to in relation to the political polarization between Democrats and Republicans. With a Democratic governor and a Republican majority in both houses of the state legislature, Senate and Assembly, politics are very divided in Wisconsin, and this has become evident with the handling of the coronavirus. Democratic governor in Wisconsin, Tony Evers, issued a stay-at-home order for Wisconsin that would be effective from March 25th. The initial stay-at-home order, in an attempt to slow the spread of coronavirus, was to remain in effect until April 24th, though it could be prolonged if necessary. This order meant that Wisconsinites could only leave their home for specific things like grocery shopping, exercise, or if they needed to see a doctor. Group sports were banned, and playgrounds closed, while people were required to keep a distance of minimum two meters to people outside their household. The penalty for not complying with the order included a 250 dollar fine or up to 30 days in jail. (White, 2020.) On April 16th, Governor Evers extended the order until May 26th. The extension of the stay-at-home order caused thousands of people to protest in front of the Wisconsin State Legislature in Madison on April 24th. "The protesters, bearing Trump campaign attire, Tea Party regalia and American flags, condemned Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, and his extension of "Safer at Home," a declaration requiring Wisconsinites to practice social distancing and to close nonessential businesses through May 26," wrote *The New York Times*. (Reid, 2020.) Then, on May 13th, the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which has a Republican majority, sided with the Republican legislators and overturned the extension of the stay-at-home order with a 4-3 decision. (Itkowitz, 2020.) A survey conducted by the Marquette Law School in Milwaukee found that, following the Supreme Court's decision, 69 percent said that the stay-at-home order was the appropriate response to the coronavirus. 26 percent said it was an overreaction. In March, 86

percent supported the order, while ten percent said it was an overreaction. (Schmidt, 2020.) As per May 30th, 2020, 588 people have died from coronavirus in Wisconsin while 18,230 have tested positive, according to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Three people have died from the virus in Sauk County. The partisan divisions between Republican and Democratic state legislators in Wisconsin highlight the magnitude of the political polarization in the state. The stark divisions between Republicans and Democrats on the handling of the coronavirus were also articulated by Brian who, at least by March 5th, didn't believe that the virus posed a threat to the American society:

> Now this coronavirus thing, that's just a talking point for the Democrats. I'm sure sooner or later they are gonna say that coronavirus was all Trump's fault. The coronavirus has been here every year for the last who knows how many years. It comes and it goes. My wife says it's here every year. When Barack Obama was president, the H1N1 swine flu virus came into the United States. 20,000 people were infected. 1,000 people were dead before he declared a state of emergency. Trump declared a state of emergency before 200 people were infected and nobody was dead. And they are saying that he dropped the ball. So, you be the judge. You know. He can't win in their eyes. He damned if he doesn't. He's damned if he don't.

As this thesis have shown, the political polarization is not only present on state- or national level. Polarization is very much present on an individual level as well. Many of the interviewees for this thesis have experienced in their own lives how divisive politics can be, and thus the polarization has an impact not only on a state- or national level, but also within families, friendships, workplaces, and congregations. Jeremy explains that his family is fairly opinionated, and that they do discuss their opinions and thoughts, though they tend to avoid discussing religion and politics, since these

topics, in Jeremy's opinion, can cause some hurt feelings. And he feels the impact of the political divisiveness in his own life with relation to the very close presidential election in 2016 when Trump won by 109 votes in Sauk County:

> You see it every day. Even members of my own family seem to be pretty much drawn down the line as to who they support. It very rarely breaks out into any sort of violence. You get some hurt feelings at the most, but violence is not unknown in other parts of the country from my understanding and from what you see on the news and read and things like that.

Jeremy's family is far from the only family in America that is now avoiding politics at family gatherings. A study from 2018 found that after the 2016 presidential election, 39 percent of American families avoided talking politics at the following Thanksgiving dinner just a few weeks after the election. (Chen, p. 1020.) For Marcia it is a similar thing as she explains that she knows who among her friends are Republicans and who are Democrats. Within her circle of friends, Marcia never discuss politics with those whom she is politically opposed to – the Democrats. But it ha always been that way she says. "A lot of the people that I associate with, a lot of my friends, I know pretty much the ones who are Democrats and pretty much the ones that fall under my way of thinking. And we really don't go there, because I think there is such a divide that we just stay away from the topic." In Marcia's experience the divisiveness between Democrats and Republicans tend to grow stronger in election years like 2020:

> I think it's just kind of a feeling that's always been there since I've been here, you know. And I think in the election years is when it really surfaces more. You can feel it more. Cause you know you're gonna get static. Either word sparks a fly. That's even like in a lot of families.

> Again, I have family that I love dearly, but we are definitely different and we don't talk politics cause we know it will never change them and it will never change us.

Dan explains that he has experienced the polarization in relation to his religion, which is very important to him. Because of his political beliefs, he had to leave the church he had been going to for the majority of his adult life:

> There was a church here in Baraboo. I went to it for like 30 years. It was the church that my wife was raised in. The church got taken over by the far right. Right to lifers and Republican people. And I've got two brother in laws and two sister in laws in that church. I don't go to that church anymore because they've become big haters, you know. So politics split churches, split families. Split them right down the middle.

The church Dan used to go to is the Advent Christian Church in Baraboo. Now he goes to the United Church of Christ – a church that holds more liberal views on issues such as homosexual rights and abortion. He still sees those of his family members who remained in the congregation, but it is difficult to be around them. "It means basically, when you're around them there could be clashes," says Dan. In Bill's life the polarization is most evident between the rural and urban communities in Sauk County. Bill grew up in a rural area of Wisconsin, and in his youth, he used to work as a farmhand, but in his adult life he does not have many interactions with people living in rural communities:

> Well, I think the divisiveness of certain people. I suppose I'm part of that too because I have one certain view. There's huge divisions. I was just thinking about that, cause' I mentioned

> farmers and small business men to you, but yet I don't, unless I'm going to buy something, associate with them. With the small business men in town here, you do converse a little bit more than just your transactions, but I don't know farmers at all. I used to work on farms, as I said my mother got me jobs all the time, including farm jobs, but I think that's part of it. It's a two-way street that we don't have at all. There's no institution that brings rural and more urban, I'd say even though we don't have any real big cities. It doesn't bring different people together.

Bill is voicing what Gimpel et al. describes as the rural-urban gulf where urban and rural people have very limited contact because of the distance and thus they oppose each other. Asked whether he lives in an echo chamber Bill says: “I have to admit that. Yes.” Though he is aware of his own role in divisions in Sauk County, Bill finds it hard to change it:

> Well, I'm pretty insular. I mean, I have to admit I'm my own problem that way, you see. And I'm comfortable that way. With certain friends and not going beyond that. If they had a workshop on organic farming, I wouldn't think of going to it, even though we're signing up for organic eggs from a farmer west of town here. I'm part of the problem. I don't know how to solve it.

Sam has experienced the political polarization in his relationship with his friends, and as a result he no longer has a Facebook-account. He lost friends on Facebook and eventually he lost them in real life as well, he explains:

> I think of an old friend of mine from high school. We were really good friends, and at some point we started talking politics more. We disagreed a lot and fought a lot. It got to the point where, you know... First he dropped me off Facebook. We stopped talking and we just... There was no more reaching out, trying to talk and say hi.

The issue that caused the friendship to end was Obamacare and today Sam feels guilty about it. "Now I look back on it and I think 'yeah, that's ridiculous. I'm not gonna do that.' I'll try to reach out and make amends a little bit more. Politically we need that for each other. We can't constantly be hostile and think we're making the world a better place," Sam says.

Dave grew up in a conservative Presbyterian family. His mother committed suicide when he was only four years old, and four years later his father remarried. They were 12 siblings altogether. He wasn't allowed to participate in sports, and he was not allowed to take medicine if he was ill. Dave broke with that way of life because of his faith which is very important to him. He reads the Holy Scripture every morning and prays every day. Today he is a member of a Methodist church:

> It had to do with feeling like, believing that the gospel talked about love, and that love is the most preeminent thing the gospel preaches and that it supersedes law. And I felt like many conservative churches, and my family, were legalistic. Black and white and really judgmental of others. (…) It was all that kind of stuff that finally said 'this isn't who I am', and that faith became much more in line with Democratic values than it did with Republican values that I consider to be kind of black and white. That was a journey. It was about 20 years ago.

Dave's career in politics has come with a prize as his own family would not sign his nomination papers and only very few of them, in Dave's estimation, would ever consider voting for him:

> I get it. I was one of them for 40 years. I still have trouble being with them a whole lot because of that. It's funny - they won't sign my nomination papers, but we go to family gatherings and they are all really excited that I'm in this office and that I'm doing this job. I don't get all that. It hurts my feelings. I feel sad about where I'm at with my family.

Jim's story shares similarities with Dave's. Jim grew up in a conservative, religious middle-class family consisting of his mother, father and younger sister. "It took myself several years to set myself free from the fear of, that guilt fear that Christianity has on you. So, I identify as an agnostic humanist." Today Jim finds it hard to be around his parents – especially his mother - and he does not want his daughter to be around her too much. "I can have a conversation with my dad. That's not a problem. He's wrong, but we can have a conversation about it, which is great. My mother... no! Whenever I'm around her, we can't talk about anything, cause we just end up yelling and screaming at each other." Outside the family Jim does not socialize much since he is very introvert. Instead he blogs and uses social media, but he tries not to interact with conservatives. "I typically weed out most of them because I just get rage filled, and then it just doesn't go well."

As the analysis of the interviews shows, all the interviewees have personal experiences with polarization. The polarization manifests itself by causing divisions in the county, in families, friendships, and in congregations. The polarization is caused by differing views on political issues and values that are ultimately emanating from the culture wars – for example abortion, gun rights, climate change, and universal health care. As Brian has previously described it: the clash between urban ideas and rural ideas. Thus, the findings from the interviews also confirm what Gimpel et al.

describes as the rural-urban gulf: that polarization among people living in Sauk County is a result of the limited contact due to the geographical distance and thus the two groups become opposed to each other.

Predictions for the 2020 presidential election

"The tension is evident in Sauk County, west of Madison, where small towns interrupt miles of farmland and where an influx of commuters to the growing capital have set up a clash between the red rurals and the blue sprawl," political media *The Hill* wrote about Sauk County on September 4th 2019. As described in the introduction to this thesis, Sauk County in Wisconsin is one of the counties that political analysts and campaign managers are keeping an eye on prior to the 2020 presidential election. The reason for this level of attention is that Sauk County has turned out to be somewhat of a bellwether county in presidential elections in the United States. In eight of the last 11 elections, Sauk County has pointed at the candidate who would eventually win and become president. And with the marginal win for Trump in 2016, decided by just 109 votes, both Republicans and Democrats are eyeing a victory in the county come November. As of May, according to an average of ten polls, Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic candidate in the presidential election, will win the state of Wisconsin with 47,0 percent of the vote, while Donald Trump will receive 40.5 percent of the votes in Wisconsin. (270towin.) But who will win Sauk County and with it, most likely, the White House? To answer that question, we must return to grounded theory. As described previously, grounded theorists construct theories from analyzing the collected data - for this thesis the data consist of interviews with voters in Sauk County. Theories are constructed in an attempt to answer questions: what happens, what follows, and why did it happen? Within grounded theory there are two general orientations that can be used to construct a theory: a positivist and an interpretivist approach. (Charmaz, p. 228.) For this thesis a positivist

approach will be used to make a bold, theoretically informed, prediction about the outcome of the 2020 presidential election – both in Sauk County as well as the whole of the United States. A positivist approach to constructing theory seeks causes, looks for explanations, and emphasizes generality and universality, argues Kathy Charmaz in *Constructing Grounded Theory.* "Positivists try to keep their values out of their research to avoid contaminating the results. This fact-value separation supports researchers' claims of impartiality and objectivity and, thus, positivists predicate the strength of their research designs and findings on the separation." (Charmaz, p. 229.) Analyzing the data collected from Sauk County, it has become evident that the polarizing factors among the Democratic and Republican interviewees are all emanating from the culture wars of the seventies – a culture war between two competing versions of America that has been successfully reactivated by President Trump. In *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* from 2015, Andrew Hartman ended his book by declaring that the American culture war was dying. But in 2018 Hartman resuscitated the culture war in his article *The Culture Wars are Dead: Long Live the Culture Wars*. "Trump's ascendancy to the White House thus seems to indicate that the culture wars endure. In the years prior to Trump's improbable victory many observers predicted that the culture wars were dying. So did I." (Hartman, 2018, p. 1.) According to Hartman, the "new millennial culture wars" are fought between two sides:

> With the Trumpist capture of the American right, the racial lines of the culture wars are fully visible again. On one side is Trump, who advanced the astonishingly popular "birther" crusade that questioned the first black president's citizenship (…) On the other side is Black Lives Matter and all those who want to hold to account cops who murder unarmed black people. (Hartman, 2018, p. 3.)

Taking the current protests and riots in several American cities, following the death of George Floyd, into account, this prediction by Hartman is almost uncanny. As Hartman argues, the American culture war has been rekindled following Trump's election as president. Thus, Hartman identifies two trends from the enduring American culture war: "First, economic anxiety and class resentment have mapped onto cultural divisions to make the culture wars angrier, more tribal, and more fundamental than ever before. Second, some older culture war struggles are subsiding due to success on the left." (Hartman, 2018, p. 6.) As this thesis has shown regarding the history of issues like abortion and homosexuals rights, there has been a backlash to every progression in American history. In itself, Trump's victory against Hilary Clinton in 2016 was the result of a backlash against eight years with Barack Obama as president. The election of Trump, and the racial resentment that his campaign was built around, resembled the backlash to the Reconstruction Era, following the end of the Civil War. As a consequence of the abolition of slavery and the introduction of Afro-American men's voting rights, the Ku Klux Klan was established. Considering this tendency to backlashes, and building on Hartman's conclusions, this thesis theorizes that Joe Biden will win the election in Sauk County, and therefore he is likely to become the next president of the United States. This assertion is further strengthened by the Spring Election in Wisconsin on April 7th 2020, when liberal judge Jill Karofsky won against the incumbent conservative Wisconsin Supreme Court judge Daniel Kelly. "Karofsky's victory marked the first time in a dozen years that a Supreme Court challenger beat an incumbent — and just the second time in more than half a century. Her win over Justice Daniel Kelly will shift conservative control of the court from 5-2 to 4-3." (Marley, 2020.) That said, with the likelihood that the coronavirus will have a severe impact on the election in November, and the incessant heated discussions, not least following the Spring Election in Wisconsin, about the legitimacy of absentee votes, it is likely that any outcome of the presidential election will be followed by protests and demands for a recount or even a rerun if the

result itself does not leave out any legitimate doubt of who will become the next president of the United States. That this is indeed a realistic scenario for the outcome of the election in November became apparent when President Trump tweeted on May 26th:

> There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent. Mail boxes will be robbed, ballots will be forged & even illegally printed out & fraudulently signed. The Governor of California is sending Ballots to millions of people, anyone living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there, will get one. That will be followed up with professionals telling all of these people, many of whom have never even thought of voting before, how, and for whom, to vote. This will be a Rigged Election. No way!

With this tweet, which was later deleted, President Trump implied that illegal immigrants in the United States, people who do not hold a United States citizenship, would be eligible to vote by mail and thus make the election result legally invalid. This led Twitter to, for the first time ever, label the president's tweets with a fact-check warning, which then again led the president to criticize Twitter in definite terms. Two days later the president retweeted a video made by "Cowboys for Trump" that opened with a man saying "I've come to the conclusion that the only good Democrat is a dead Democrat." These tweets emphasize the high level of polarization among Republicans and Democrats. In relation to the first tweet, it would seem to many that a high turnout among voters at elections is a positive thing as it indicates that people take responsibility and pride in their right to vote. However, the conventional conviction in relation to elections in the United States is that the Democratic Party benefits from a high turnout, while the Republican Party benefits from a low turnout as Republican voters tend to have a higher turnout than Democratic voters. (Isenstadt,

2020.) This can help explain why President Trump and the Republican Party are strong opponents to absentee voting since it reduces the chances of a Republican win at the election in November. In contrast, the Democratic Party are strong advocates for absentee voting as it increases the chances of a Democratic win. Thus, all indications point to a rarely seen ugly election in November.

Conclusion

A house divided against itself cannot stand, said Abraham Lincoln on June 16th 1858, as he accepted the Illinois State Republican nominee for senator. Though Lincoln spoke about the issue of slavery, the same can be said about Sauk County; a county divided against itself cannot stand. This thesis has examined which factors can help explain the current polarization between Democrats and Republicans in Sauk County – in an attempt to contribute to a greater understanding of an American society where polarization has been in an upward trend in recent decades. Polarization has always been part of the United States; the divisions between Democratic-Republicans and Federalists, in this thesis referred to as Jeffersonians versus Hamiltonians, the Civil War, fought over the issue of slavery, and the culture wars – just to name a few incidents which have divided the nation throughout history. As this thesis has shown, Sauk County, as well as the United States in general, have become more polarized on moral and cultural issues such as abortion, second amendment rights, universal health care, and climate change. Thus, this thesis argues that the political polarization in Sauk County is a continuation of the culture wars in the 1970's. The interviewees in Sauk County have become increasingly polarized on issues stemming from that period – especially on the issue of abortion. However, from analyzing the interviews, this thesis finds that the most polarizing factor is President Trump, who, with his presidency, has driven a wedge between liberals and conservatives – not only in Sauk County – but in the whole of the United States. When President Trump has become such a polarizing figure it has to do with how he

has successfully reignited the culture wars for his personal gain. Like Reagan in the eighties, Trump spoke about an American past in his campaign for the presidency, *Make America Great Again*, which spoke to evangelicals and conservatives alike. He spoke of an imagined America that thrived before the disruptive culture wars of the seventies. As shown with the differing media habits among Democrats and Republicans, as well their perception of the media, Trump has successfully managed to politicize political or cultural issues and reduce it to a matter of being either for or against him. It has become mainstream to question facts, and the public debate has become high-pitched and at times almost violent. This thesis emphasizes that this unprecedented level of political polarization and distrust among Democrats and Republicans, both in Sauk County and in the United States in general, can ultimately harm the individual freedoms that the nation is so proudly advocating for. Based on these findings, this thesis argues, utilizing grounded theory, that Joe Biden will win the presidential election in November, and the outcome of the election is likely to be followed by protests and demands for a recount as a direct consequence of the growing polarization and distrust between Democrats and Republicans. Based on the conclusions presented in this thesis, chances of reconciliation between Democrats and Republicans any time soon, on the issues that are stemming from the culture wars, are very limited. But, following the argument by Fiorina and Abrams that polarization increases when a population moves from one consensual state to its opposite, in 20 years public opinion in 2020 could appear as the culmination of the culture wars – a climax in a transitional period where America is moving slowly towards a new consensus on the moral and cultural issues presented in this thesis.

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